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Prologue

Summer comes in fast. Even though it's hot during the day, it's less than 10 degrees in the morning, so it still feels like you'll need a long sleeved shirt. I notice that today it the first day I don't feel the need to wear a long sleeved shirt under my uniform.

"The sunlight's strong…"

Walking to the school bus, I look up to see a plane carving a short, white trail along the blue sky. It's starting to get hot out. As I walk, my back starts to get hot. Summer will be hitting Asahikawa soon. I try to hide in the blue shadows from the tree branches as I walk down that familiar street. Past the mirage on the road, a white house catches my eye. The strong sunlight makes the shadows look dark, causing everything to look like it's floating. I'm left standing in wonder, feeling a bit out of place. However, once I walk through the entrance, an even stranger world is waiting for me.

"Oh my, young master. You're early today, aren't you? What about school?"

When I ring the doorbell, gran greets me while she fixes the hem of her apron.

"I had tests during the morning."

"Well, well."

After apologizing for the intrusion, I take me shoes off and head for the living room. I don't confirm with gran if I can go in, but it's natural for me to just walk in now. In this situation, if someone called "I'm home", it wouldn't be uncomfortable to say "welcome back".

"I think the lady will be back soon."

Even though she emailed me that she was going home, as usual, Sakurako-san isn't home.

"That's fine, I can study while I wait."

"Well, would you like to have lunch first?"

"That'd be great. I'm hungry. I intended to head home after I finished my errands, so I haven't eaten yet. I have a math test tomorrow that I'm not ready for."

With other subjects, I seem to have a special knack for them, but I've always been bad at math. If you don't study properly, you'll never be able to escape the red X marks. So for today, I won't visit for too long. It's okay, I can study anywhere, but I can only have gran's delicious food and tea here.

"A growing boy shouldn't be left hungry. I'll hurry up and prepare."

Gran hurries into the kitchen. While I take out my writing tools and textbook, I take a look around the living room. This is always such a strange room.

Since this house was built long ago, the ceilings are low, giving an oppressing feeling. Sakurako-san says the only areas in the house that feel spacious are the living room and garden.

However, the feeling of oppression comes from more than the low ceiling. The walls, shelves, and everything else in the room is covered in animal bones, either in glass cases, or exposed. I can't help feeling uncomfortable in here, but I'm used to it. In the beginning, this room was strange and uncomfortable, but it has become so familiar that I'm starting to feel attached

to it, I think.

While I open my pencil case, I look around. I notice the small, white, newcomer on the mantelpiece of the fireplace. Recently, there's been several newcomers in this room, so I try not to read the label as I wonder "what bone is this?" I feel like I've been poisoned by Sakurako-san. I approach the small rodent. It has sharp front teeth and a long, thin tail. I know that these are mouse bones.

I'm sure it's hard to remove the flesh from small animals like this, so I've asked Sakurako-san before if it's hard to assemble. She said that it's very difficult to make them white like this. I'm sure she's proud of it. She fully explained it to me as soon as I arrived… I wonder if that's why I was invited.

There are also squirrel and hamster bones on the mantelpiece. This must be the rodent corner. The only exception is the picture frame that is turned backwards. I once asked why it was backwards, but Sakurako-san glared at me, so I pretend not to notice now. I really wonder what kind of picture is hidden, though.

"Oh…"

While I unintentionally stare at the picture frame, gran stands next to me, holding a tray of tea.

"… It's a picture of her family. Since the lady wouldn't like it, please don't touch it."

She must be worried about me touching it, she sounds annoyed with me. Just as I was taught, I keep speaking patiently. But, when I speak like this, I become less patient. I pick up the black tea that gran sets out for me.

"Gran, has Sakurako-san been here since she was a child?"

"That's right… I've been serving here since the wife was 10 years old."

"Wife as in Sakurako-san's mother?"

"Yes. I have been serving the lady since she was in her mother's stomach."

Gran hesitates for a moment before she answers my question. I watch her, and choose my words carefully. This is my first time hearing about Sakurako-san's mom and the house.

"What kind of person was Sakurako-san's mother?"

"…"

Gran's face turns cloudy. Apparently I've gone too far. She suddenly remembers an errand and says "Honestly, where has the lady gone off to?" and heads into the kitchen.

I don't know why, but it seems to Sakurako-san, "mother" is a taboo word. Whenever the topic comes up, the air suddenly goes cold, and I feel like I've been shut out of the house. Nonetheless, I can't do anything about it, so I begin obediently cramming for my exams.

Honestly, I don't hate this so-called science. I don't *hate* it. I like reading, but I prefer chemistry over physics and language classes. Math is the only thing that is absolutely not fun to learn. When studying, my mom says fun and boring don't exist, but I'm not naturally diligent, which makes things that aren't fun more painful.

"Do you hate numbers?"

I guess she can see it on my face. I'm at a stalemate with a difficult trigonometry question, which I'm particularly bad at. I furrow my eyebrows. Gran sees me groaning and staring at my mechanical pencil while she pours be a second cup of tea. She let's a laugh slip.

"I can't get a good score even if I study, but if I fail, an have to take supplementary

lessons over summer vacation, which I'd like to avoid…"

When you get hungry, it becomes hard to think. My concentration drifts to the pot in the kitchen. My stomach growls when I smell the scent of rice starting to cook. I close my notebook.

"Since you study hard, I'm sure you'll be okay."

"I wish that was the case."

I accidentally let out a sigh. All the effort in math goes unrewarded. I always think "It has to be this!", but when it doesn't produce results, I end up thinking "Huh? It isn't?" and get disappointed. This time, I really don't have any confidence.

"Then let me teach you a magic spell."

I've never seen Gran look so confident. She pats me on the head, then puts a cup of tea in front of my face.

"Magic spell?"

"Yes. They say that your wish will be granted if you drink tea."

"Huh…"

I nod halfheartedly while looking at gran. I've never cared much for jinxes, or fairytale-like things, so I've never tried one. Do they really work? I look at gran, and she pokes me with her index finger.

"I taught the wife."

"Huh…?"

She had taught it to Sakurako-san's mother. I think it's something special, so I straighten myself in my chair. Gran hands me a small, silver spoon.

"Alright, so when you drink tea, with the spoon you…"

I don't know if it's the warm steam from the tea, or if it's Sakurako-san's mother's charm that's making my head blank. I hope I can pass my math test tomorrow with enough points to get a summer break.

First bone: Bones that Sleep in the Summer

Part 1

When I wake up, if the sky I see is blue, it puts me in a good mood all day. Even though it's far too hot during the summer in Asahikawa, I still like it. Above all that, sunny days always make me happy. Cloudy is cloudy, rainy is rainy, snowy is snowy, I like those, but sunny days during the summer when the pale blue sky in the morning spread all over are irresistible. It always makes me want to go out somewhere.

But even so, I have to stay locked up inside to prepare for final exams before the holiday. I've saved up my pocket money so I can buy a Bianchi (an Italian bike!) However, being able to buy it at last makes me feel a little bit lonely. I want to go out for a while, so I call Sakurako-san.

I talk with gran for a little while, she's in a good mood. After a while, she puts Sakurako-san on the line, since she's just about to leave. Good timing.

"I'm going to Touma. Do you want to come?"

"Huh? Why Touma?"

Touma, central Kawakami district, Hokkaido. Located next to Asahikawa, the town is known for its bright red and and black, sweet "black skinned watermelon". It competes for first and second place in Hokkaido for rice production. I don't think there's many people who have been to the food corner of a supermarket and not seen the name Touma. Nonetheless, the town itself is a peaceful agricultural community, spread out in a rural area. Now that I think about it, how did I honestly ask Sakurako-san "Why Touma?"

"Ah, I have to get roses. Ms. Shiyouko said rose season has already ended, but she kindly asked another gardener to put aside some good roses," Sakurako-san says.

"Touma has roses?"

"Don't say something so stupid. Don't you know Touma has Japan's best roses in summer?"

I don't know enough about flowers to say anything.

"But, Touma"

Although it's good to go get roses, the way to Touma is a bit boring. It'd be fun to ride my bike there… I suddenly remember that there's something else there besides watermelon and rice.

"Then, could we please go to the limestone cave?"

"Limestone cave?"

"Yeah, legend has it that a married pair of dragons lives in a big limestone cave. I went there as a child."

It seems there's an unusual stalactite (macaroni stalactite) that you can only see in Hokkaido. I was too young to understand it when I went before. If I get the opportunity, I want to see it again.

"… Well, I guess that's fine. Also, there is a place I want to visit."

Sakurako-san is silent for a moment, as if she's thinking, then says in a confident tone,

"I will pick you up in 15 minutes."

-beep

“Huh? Ah…”

Before I can say anything, the one-sided phone call ends.

“15 minutes…!”

I’ve been sweating all morning, I can’t go out like this. I suddenly become frantic. I take a shower, change my clothes, and manage to meet her at a fast food shop. However, my companion, Sakurako-san, is loose on time. In the end, she appeared over 20 minutes late. My hair, which I didn’t dry properly, is cold from the air conditioner. I hope I don’t get sick.

Part 2

It’s terrible to be familiar with such a noisy song. The lyrics used to start suddenly, but they don’t surprise me anymore. After delivering the roses at the hospital, we get back in Sakurako-san’s car and head towards the limestone cave.

Outside the window, the green sea is passing quickly on both sides. The rice plants in the field ripple with the wind. It’s almost like you can see the shape of the wind as it blows by. Since the weather is good this summer, an abundant harvest is expected.

I’ve heard that it takes one rice plant to make one sake cupful of sake. When I remember that while I’m looking at a rice field, it always feels impressive. Even so, the Diavel’s laughter echoes through the car, and ruins the atmosphere – I hate heavy metal, after all.

The limestone cave suddenly appears in the countryside. There’s a sign that tells exactly where the cave is. I thought it would be deeper in the mountains, but the signboard on a light blue pole with a golden dragon on it stand between the rice fields. The sign says that the limestone caves are there. It seems there’s still a short way to go before we get there. Following the sign, Sakurako-san drives up a hill, surrounded by trees.

Soon, we drive into a big parking lot. It seems this is the limestone cave. There doesn’t seem to be anyone else in the parking lot. As we get out of the car, I hear birds and insects chirping.

It seems this cave was formed 150 million years ago, during the Jurassic era. In the plaza next to the parking lot, there are 3 realistic looking dinosaurs. Children seem to want to touch or ride the dinosaurs, so there’s a sign that says “Do not touch the dinosaurs. It makes them angry.” After reading that, I laugh. We pass through the plaza, pass the dinosaurs and shops, and climb the stairs. We find the ticket sales area just beyond the bridge.

It seems there’s no student fee, so high school students have to pay the adult fee. Slightly frustrated, we both pay 500 yen to the old lady, and head to the entrance of the limestone cave.

As we enter the cave, we walk down the stone steps. The entrance is well maintained, it looks like a tunnel. It’s starting to feel like an adventure now, I’m getting excited. When I was in middle school, I went to a cave in the town on Nakatonbetsu, which is below Wakkanai. I couldn’t see much of the inside, but there was pretty moss growing on the inside. However, the Touma cave has its own merits.

After looking at the map, we enter the cave. The inside is cold, with a slightly damp scent. I thought it would be dark and hard to walk inside, but there's lots of lights, and enough footholds that it's easy to walk through. I'm a bit disappointed that the main sightseeing points are lit up and covered in signs, as it ruins the "cave exploration" feeling, but it's really only a little bit.

The glossy appearance of the smooth stalactites makes it look a bit like the internal organs of an animal. It's a bit grotesque. I remember how people a long time ago thought dragons lived here. Sakurako-san doesn't seem as impressed or moved as I am. Rather, she seems bored, and uncomfortable about how low the ceiling gets in some spots as she follows behind me.

"Oops." She slips. "Sorry."

She smiles as me while I grab her hand to help her back up.

"The footholds are narrow here," I say as we walk while still holding hands for a little while. Her hand is cold. Come to think of it, she probably would be cold in the cave wearing a sleeveless shirt and black jeans. I wish I had something to put around her shoulders, but unfortunately, I left my parka in the car. It can't be helped – I quickly turn around to leave the cave.

We exit the cave, and enter the dazzling sunlight. The heat wrapping around my cold skin makes me feel itchy. Finally feeling alive again, I turn back to Sakurako-san. She's smiling at me.

"It was a little cold, wasn't it?"

"That's right. I accidentally left my coat in the car," She says, stretching in the sun.

I wonder if it was just cramped and boring for her.

"Aren't you interested in the mysteries of nature, Sakurako-san?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your reaction was weak, like always…"

To my question, she only blinks and shrugs her shoulders.

"I don't understand what the point of your question is, but are you asking if I was moved? To that, my answer is no. Isn't it just a lump of calcium carbonate?"

Just ordinary calcium – even so, it's calcium from 150 000 years ago.

"Right… But isn't calcium similar to bones?"

Since she loves bones, I'm sure this will make her feel a bit more attached to the cave. I'm starting to get a bit serious about this. Even so, she still starts to laugh at me.

"If you mean an invertebrate, it would be, but I am a vertebrate. My bones aren't made of calcium carbonate, they're made of hydroxyapatite, which is a type of calcium phosphate."

"I thought invertebrate didn't have bones?"

"They do."

Invertebrates are limp animals without spines. At least, jellyfish don't have bones. She instantly denies my words while faintly smiling.

"You can't see them with the naked eye, you need a microscope to see them. If you look at an animal like a sponge under a microscope, you'll find tiny bone fragments. They're not connected like vertebrae are. The main ingredients are calcium silicate and calcium carbonate, just like that stalactite over there."

“Huh… Then it’s almost like we just came out of the bones of a giant invertebrate, so to speak.”

Looking back at the limestone cave, she smiles. This time, it’s a gentle smile.

“Well, that’s a pretty extreme way if putting it, but it’s fine. I don’t hate it.”

“Well, how about we through one more time? We still haven’t found the macaroni stalactites.”

I hold up one of my index fingers while I ask her. It takes 10 minutes to go around the cave again.

“You’re just as strange as usual.”

“Well, it’s because I’m with you, Sakurako-san.”

“What? What do you mean?”

She looks puzzled and wrinkles her eyebrows. It’s my turn to laugh at her, this time. I wave her away with my hand, then head back into the open mouth, towards the dragon’s bed. One by one, I can start to see the cold, unusual macaroni stalactites coming into view. I’m completely satisfied. I didn’t think I had taken very long, but it seems I was in the cave for quite a while.

Sakurako-san is waiting impatiently at the bottom of the stairs, so I descend hastily. I apologize for the wait, but she just nods plainly. I don’t know why I’m apologizing, since it doesn’t feel like she cares. She may have already forgotten. At any rate, the two of us go back to the parking lot and get in the car.

We park again soon at what seems to be another parking lot on the other side of the cave. I thought it was a second parking lot, but Sakurako-san stops the car. Why did we bother coming here? I was going to ask, but Sakurako-san soon answers my question. To be exact, the billboard right in front of us answers my question.

“Let’s walk a bit.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s walk, it’s close by.”

“This is the limestone cave green park. Ehh…”

I read the signboard, and agree. Apparently, in addition to the limestone cave there’s a bit of a walking trail here, as well. It’s good to go on a short walk before lunch. I wrap my parka around my waist and pursue Sakurako-san. There’s several trails, but she seems to have picked the mini mountain climbing trail. It’s moderately paved, and slopes gently.

“Where are we going?!”

It’s fine at first, but after a while of walking. The trail ends, and she pushes away the Japanese knotweed, then walks off into the mountain. I’m terrified.

“Geez! Please wait a minute! This isn’t part of the route! This is a game trail!”

I rush over while putting on my parka, desperately hoping she’ll stop. It doesn’t seem like she’s listening to me, since she keeps going anyway.

“This isn’t good! A brown bear could come out!”

“It’s fine! Animals aren’t going to go near the trails, we need to go where animals are. That’s where we’ll find corpses!”

“H… How can you think like that!”

Her bad habit is starting again – although I complain and it’s cold, she came to the

limestone cave without complaining, so I guess I owe her a little thanks… I decide to return the favour and go along with her. I hope I don't have to pick up any decomposing animals before I have lunch.

"Honestly, I don't even have my trekking shoes."

I put my arms into the sleeves of the parka to protect my skin, and walk down the pathless trail while Sakurako-san leaves my view. When we're together, she always gets away from the "ordinary". Maybe I unconsciously picked sneakers, my more solid shoes, because of that.

"Please don't get lost like a child."

She sees something and stops, I close the distance between us a bit until I see her squatting and looking at the ground. Instead of responding to me, Sakurako-san just holds up her car keys and shakes them. There is a transparent rectangular plate hanging from the key.

"Ah, it's a Silver Company compass. I have one at my house, too."

"… You also said before that you've climbed mountains. Is mountain climbing your hobby?"

It's a Swedish oil base plate compass. It suddenly jolts to a stop. They're loved by mountain climbers. For its ability, it's a comparatively low price.

"Well, it's not really my hobby. I used to go up simple mountains for beginners with my grandfather, like Kurodake and Akadake to see the colour of the fall leaves."

"As long as we don't get lost, it's fine."

"No, it's not fine…"

It'll be okay as long as I have a map and my GPS… Though I still don't think we should've come out so deep. I take a look around. It's said that the mountains in Hokkaido are dangerous. Even a casual climb could end up being life or death. Even in midsummer, depending on your equipment, you could freeze to death. If you take mountains lightly, you could get lost since you aren't careful.

I look up, and see the blue sky and small clouds peeking through the trees. The wind shaking my hair gently, the slightly wet soil, and sweet scent of grass makes me happy. I think it's a really nice day. Why does Sakurako-san, who is looking down to search for bones and dead animals, not notice this pleasantness? No, I guess she has noticed. Perhaps she just doesn't feel the same way as me.

There is a difference between us, even if it is sometimes disappointing. Still, I quietly thank Sakurako-san for taking me here today. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be in this place right now. Being with her isn't boring at least… and she's not a bad person.

"Shouldn't we head back soon? Isn't it past noon? Aren't you hungry?"

After waking for a while, I decide it's a good time to say something. Sakurako-san seals a dead baby bird in a plastic bag. Perhaps it died when it fell out of its nest. Sakurako-san says it's a "black faced bunting" chick. I hadn't heard of a black faced bunting before. Sakurako-san seems satisfied with the "harvest" of the baby bird.

We talk about visiting the healthy chateau that has delicious handmade pizza and pasta for lunch. I start to walk down the mountain a little quicker. Once we return to the proper climbing route, I hear "that voice".

"What…"

I don't know what it what it is at first, but it sounds like a man and a woman screaming if I listen close. The screaming seems to be coming closer, along with gasping and loud rustling noises. Suddenly, a man and a woman of about 20 years old jump onto the path.

"D-d-dead body!"

After seeing us, the man looks surprised for a moment. As he speaks, he's pulling up his pants and fixing his belt. I'm amazed that he was in the bushes when there's dangerous animals, like bears and stray dogs around.

"Bones! Bones!"

The woman behind him is correcting the hem on her border tunic with a pale face. I was going to ask what happened to the man, but it seems they came from the clearing that's just a short way from the path. A few years ago, a cliff on the slope collapsed due to heavy rain, and since it's been removed from the mountain climbing route. A lot of couples take "walks" here since the view is nice. She probably went to lay down and stretch, but touched the bones of a corpse.

"There's no doubt that they're human bones…"

The woman is shivering and rubbing her hands together, as if trying to clean off invisible dirt. It's obvious what the two were actually doing in a place like this… My anger grows, but when the woman starts crying, my anger chills in an instant. Seeing a dead body right before your eyes is a very shocking thing. Those poor people… I don't think they'll forget this day for the rest of their lives.

"Are you alright?" I ask the woman. The man standing next to her looks nauseated, with a green face. I can't hear her reply, because I notice that Sakurako-san is joyfully walking into the bushes.

"Wait a minute! Please wait! Sakurako-san!"

No matter how much I say it, I already know that there's no chance she'll wait. Still, I call her name while chasing after her into the spot where the man came out from just a moment ago. There's a way up the cliff on the hill, but it seems like it's blocked a few metres away.

"Please don't go off on your own. What if something happens to you?"

"In the event that something does happen, it won't change anything whether I'm alone or not."

The way she says it without even turning to look at me makes me angry. There's no need to say something like that when I'm just trying to be helpful.

"Well, fine. More importantly, come see this, boy."

"I don't want to."

She looks excited about whatever's by her feet, so I reply immediately. Even without seeing what she found, I already have an idea about what it is.

"It's alright, it doesn't smell. It's entirely bone."

"I don't want to!"

"You'd better come see it. It's a beautiful, natural masterpiece."

She pulls on my arm, then puts me in a headlock when I try to escape. She tries to force me to look at the dead body, but I close my eyes as hard as I can.

"Are you sure? If you put a corpse outside, flies will start to find it in 30 seconds. Their sense of smell is praiseworthy. Then, they lay their eggs inside the cavities. Ears, nose… all

cavities. Surprisingly, fly eggs can hatch in 24 hours at 20 degrees, 30 hours at 18 degrees, and 10 hours at 30 degrees."

Sakurako-san starts her lecture while standing before the corpse. I couldn't care less about how fast fly eggs hatch, but being so close to her chest makes me embarrassed.

"Maggots born on dead flesh grow up in the blink of an eye. A few days after death, a body will be covered in maggots. Carnivorous wasps and other animals also eat the maggots during that time. Small animals and other insects that like corpses also gather. The corpse becomes a beautiful garden of life for a short time, then, only lovely bones remain. They also become beautiful thanks to the work of microbes. It's really, truly wonderful." She repeats the word "wonderful" in a sad voice.

It's true, even I'm curious. When it's about bones, she gets swept away by her emotions. I timidly open my eyes.

"Ugh…"

As she says, beautiful bones are lying quietly in the grass. It's not a decomposing corpse. Of course, it's covered in dirt, and it's not white like a skeletal specimen, but it's still beautiful bone, clean of any flesh. Also, one part of the skull isn't level. The skull seems to only be connected to the neck bones by the tattered clothes. Perhaps the ribs and spine are inside the clothes. As I look down a bit more, I see one of the femurs has rolled away from the pant leg a bit. There's a shiny, black rhinoceros beetle on the bone. Suddenly, I feel like I can't take my eyes off the corpse as burning vomit comes up my throat.

"Maggots always follow a very specific growth process. By comparing the size of the maggots and the temperature, it's possible to figure out how long something has been dead. A forensic professor, like my uncle, can figure out how long it's been up to half a year since it died." Sakurako-san continues her lecture, even though I don't care. "Although people tend to be disgusted with disease carrying creatures, they play an important role in the chain of the world. When you think about it, you never show respect for them. Flies love fresh bodies. They're very greedy, and specialized for growing. They don't live very long in their final stage of life."

I smile enthusiastically at Sakurako-san, pretending like I'm interested, so she finally releases me. Or I tried, anyway. I shakily grab my shoulders with both hands.

"Aren't you interested, boy? We're wrapped up in the big ring called the food chain even after our body stops metabolizing, and our cells collapse," she says seriously, while so worked up her cheeks are red. But I'm honest, and subconsciously wrinkle my nose.

"Don't make that face. I went and saw your macaroni stalactites, so now I get to feel the majesty of nature in the form of human remains."

"I understand. Then, can I report it soon?"

"… What?"

I take out my phone while talking. I thought I might be out of range, but I have one bar. Sakurako-san just blinks for a moment, then looks sad.

"You can't just make that face. This is the duty of good citizens."

"That's not okay! Fine, I won't take it home. I'll leave it here, but go and see it, let's do that!"

"You're just saying that. You shouldn't do this," I answer firmly.

"… You definitely have an abnormally large left lung." Sakurako-san groans. She speaks in a tearful voice.

"Lung? Why is that?"

"Although the heart is mostly in the centre of your chest, there is a larger portion on the left, making the left lung slightly smaller than the right. But, you're heartless. I have too much heart."

I disregard her rude words. But still… How many times have I made these reports? Are the police starting to think I'm a suspicious character? Though, I can't just not report them. I have a familiar uneasiness in my chest, as I tap the police's number that's saved in my phone.

The police arrive after about 2 hours. The couple that discovered the corpse seem to have escaped. When I look back at the mountain trail, they're gone. The two of us helplessly meet with the police.

Several officers start touching the body, investigating the scene, checking our identities and asking why we're there, and thoroughly digging through the leaves. Of course it's hard to say that we were looking for dead animals, so I keep that a secret. I told them that we were on a walk, then the couple that discovered the body first jumped out at us. They seem to believe it.

"Is that couple you two?"

"O-of course not!"

The old police officer grins, while I turn red. He talks like an old tanuki, has round eyes, a really tanuki-like charm to his face. His general atmosphere is crafty, like he's unlikely to make a mistake. He's the type of person I don't like.

"Well, I won't press into why you're here, but can you tell me who passed away?"

Even if he asks if we know them, it's only white bones, so you can't tell. Sakurako-san snorts as if she's listening to something funny.

"I can't say for sure, but I can guess. It's not wearing summer clothes. I would guess they died in either spring or fall. However, since it's not buried in the ground, the bones would whiten fast, but there's a long time between winter and fall. Additionally, the areas under the clothes seem to be partially mummified. Adipocere wouldn't have formed if it was warm and dry. Because of these things, you should look for people who went missing before fall last year," Sakurako-san replies smoothly, while the police officers give her a blank look. "You can see that there's a fracture on the top cervical vertebrae. The cause of death was likely suffocation due to phrenic nerve palsy. The root was of problem was probably this cliff right here." Sakurako-san points to the cliffs that are about 10 metres away.

"Top cervical vertebrae…?" The police officer repeats, as if it's an unfamiliar word.

"I mean that they broke their neck." Sakurako-san's pained face says she's thinking "at least listen a little bit."

"So why would they suffocate?"

Sakurako-san seems to think this is a stupid question. Even though it's not an unusual thing to ask, she wrinkles her eyebrows. I also don't understand how a neck fracture can cause suffocation.

"A cervical vertebra fracture won't cause instant death. The problem is that it takes a lot to cut a nerve. If the spinal cord is damaged, the brain can't send instructions to all the organs. In a case where the top vertebrae, which rule over the respiratory system, are damaged, you

won't be able to breathe."

"So, death by suffocation…" I mutter.

"This corpse belongs to an adult, asian woman. Looking at the pelvis, she has had children. Judging by her tooth wear, she was about 70 before she died, and it has probably been 6-12 months since she died. The direct cause of death was probably a cervical spine injury, and suffocation due to phrenic nerve palsy."

"W-why do you know that?!" A young police officer yells in surprise.

"It's easy. First, you determine if the body is male or female. To determine this from the bones, you first want to look at the skull and pelvis."

"Even if you can't tell by the bones, you can tell by the clothes." An elderly officer cuts into the conversation.

"That's right. However, you can't be certain that the person isn't crossdressing," Sakurako-san says as she quickly walks towards the body. "The skull is quite eloquent. For example, the frontal bone. A man's is more slanted backwards, and they develop a bulge above the eye sockets. You can also determine their race by the eye sockets and dental arch." Sakurako-san smiles happily, and points to the skull with her palm facing up. "When looking at a woman's body, you should check for a pregnancy mark on the pelvis to determine if she's gone through childbirth. It should be near the joint with the sacrum. The number of, and presence of, this mark can tell you how many children she's had. Well, the number isn't always entirely accurate. The hormones released during pregnancy can extend the ligaments," Sakurako-san says, as she pulls a nitrile glove out of her pocket and slides her fingers into it and slaps it against her wrist.

That's the most detestable sound in the whole world to me. I unintentionally turn my face away as she sits down and starts picking at the corpse's clothes.

"So, the age. Try looking at the joint where the two halves of the pelvis connect. The surface and shape of this area changes with age. To put it simply, before you're an adult, the ridge along the surface is clear. As people age, it becomes shallower, until it's flat by 30 years old. After 40 years old, invasive destruction from geriatric changes begin to cause irregular ossification – do you understand?"

"What? Huh? Ah… no… yes" The young officer gives a bewildered answer, and jumps back a bit with surprise.

He said "yes", but his tone says he doesn't really understand. He didn't say it easily. Well… He probably didn't think a passerby would be able to tell someone's age and whether or not they'd given birth from a pelvis.

"Even so, this is a miracle. Finding a dead body in such beautiful condition outside, without any chips or part missing is exceedingly rare, I must say. Usually an animal will get at it. What a lucky woman… well, she wouldn't think that." After adding "because she's dead", she starts to laugh, as if it's a joke, then gives a satisfied nod and reaches both hands toward the body.

She looks like she wants to hug it. I finally realize something about Sakurako-san (who is talking in standard Japanese because she's so excited). She found bones, human bones which she desires from the bottom of her heart, and she can fully enjoy them until the police show up. Borrowing her words, she's deeply moved and uplifted by "the magnificence of nature". To the

police, she's a troublesome person who they don't want to get involved with, because she just gives lectures.

"… What?"

As usual, the police seem to assume Sakurako-san is someone who needs "special attention". They grab both of Sakurako-san's arms, and surround her.

"I understand, but would you accompany me to the station first?"

"What? You want me to accompany you? Of course I refuse, why? Why should I accompany you? Or maybe you didn't listen to me, even though I explained so clearly that we didn't find the corpse?"

"Sakurako-san!"

Sakurako-san speaks in a scoffing tone. The police officers seem to be at a loss, then look serious. This is bad. Very bad. I act quickly while the officers are trying to pull Sakurako-san away by her arms.

"Sakurako-san's uncle worked as a forensics professor, so she has detailed knowledge about pointless things like this! But in the end, it's still only an amateur's guess. Please don't ignore her. We're just ordinary people who came here after hearing a shriek while walking through the forest!"

"What's pointless?" Sakurako-san says with a dissatisfied voice while glaring at me.

"Still, we really are unrelated."

"Now now, I'll hear about this after we get to the station."

After grabbing her, the old tanuki officer smirks. I didn't have confidence in what I was saying from the beginning. I'm irritated. I really dislike that weak type of person.

"Please wait. I can deny questioning anyway, right? If it's necessary, I'd like for it to be after I can consult with a lawyer."

After I speak, the old officer raises one eyebrow.

"I don't know where you learned to talk like that, but could you try not to be a bother?"

The old officer doesn't seem to be from this island, and seems to be talking to me like a small child, slowly. First of all, I'm not a child that needs to be spoken to like that. Second, this is definitely illegal. I imagine getting in trouble for this, and try to make my face appear calm again. However, in deep in my heart, I'm angry and impatient.

"I understand that the first rule of investigations is "doubt the person who discovered the corpse." In that case, you should listen to the couple that found the corpse, not us."

"You should be able to prove that this couple exists, then."

"…I understand. Then please let us get in touch with someone who can verify who we are."

The old police officer is blunt. Helplessly, I contact Ariwara-san. Since Ariwara-san can prove our identities, they seem to believe us for now. Somehow we got through it without any other problems, though the old officer is still reluctant, and insists on disagreeing with us.

Thanks to Sakurako-san, I'm having trouble enjoying our trip today. No, she isn't entirely in the wrong this time… No, she might still be in the wrong this time. After all, I had to end up relying on Ariwara-san. I'd like to deal with problems like these on my own whenever possible.

Unfortunately, she says "I took a piece of the phalange" once we get back in the car. I

get so angry that I don't utter a single word to her.

Part 3

I don't have any plans today, so I go to Touma. No, I actually had plans with a close friend today, but he got a high fever. I guess it's a cold. I was going to use some cheap tickets I got from a coupon site so we could go to karaoke and go bowling, but I guess it can't be helped if he's in bad shape. I send him a get well soon email, then end up going to Sakurako-san's house anyway.

I could have gone to another friend's house, but I was acting immature in the car yesterday, so I wanted to apologize. As more time passes, it gets harder and harder to say you're sorry. When I get to her house, Sakurako-san sulks while greeting me. I apologize after clearing my head, but she has a blank look. Somehow, I was expecting it, but Sakurako-san doesn't seem to realize I was angry yesterday. I start to think that her sullenness might be because she was scolded by both gran and Ariwara-san after they heard about the situation. It seems that last night, Ariwara-san got a phone call to apologize for her. Her reluctance must have made him angry.

When I'm unable to contain Sakurako-san, I feel guilty and incompetent, but Ariwara-san thinks Sakurako-san is old enough to control herself. However, being treated like a child hurts my pride a bit. Anyway, from now on, I'm going to have to be a bit more careful.

Ariwara-san and gran both thank me for not letting Sakurako-san get taken away by the police, and they apologize to me. Even if she's unrelated to the investigation, gran says that "a lady of the Kujo household was taken by the police" would be a huge scandal. As a reward for all I went through, gran makes my favourite food for lunch.

There's also furano melon for dessert, the Rupiah red variety. The moment it's cut, the rich aroma and vivid flesh cause me the break out in a smile. When I bite into a piece, the rich sweetness feels like it's spreading through my whole body. Surprisingly, Sakurako-san doesn't like melon very much (she says it tastes bad and that it's disgusting). I finish my delicious piece.

"Could you be a bit quieter?"

Sakurako-san, who is watching TV while I make a big fuss about my melon, glares at me with her index finger on her lips. She's watching the news, they seem to be talking about a new substance that might help with ALS, an incurable disease. Afterwards, the story about the skeletal corpse we found comes on, making be panic a bit.

"…I guess they found her identity."

"It seems so."

It seems that the corpse belongs to a 70 year old woman from Toma named Kougami Asa. The incident seems to be unclear, so the police are investigating it as both an accident and a suicide.

"A 70 year old woman, I guess they used your findings," I say, but she only laughs at me. I thought it was a natural conclusion to make.

Still, it seems like she's cheered up a bit. Since the weather is good today, we went to the Asahikawa City Science Museum to see the stars and telescope at the planetarium. After

seeing it, we went to a big bookstore near the science museum, and spent a whole hour trying to choose a book. I think it was a good day off, but the thought of the body being a person with a personality and a name, Asa, didn't leave my mind for the whole day. Still, after one day passing turns into two, then many more, the memory begins to fade. After about a week, the memory of the corpse has completely faded, and I'm back to my everyday life.

"Tatewaki-kun, you have a visitor~"

While eating lunch and talking about a game with my friends, a girl from my class calls out to me from the door, grinning.

"A visitor?"

I stand up and ask who it is, but she just smiles and beckons me to come over. I have no choice but to go to the classroom door and see who it is myself.

"What is it-"

Besides the classmate who called me over, there's a girl from a different class standing there.

"Umm… uhh…?"

"I'm sorry for calling you over here."

I think I know who she is, but I don't really know her. Our eyes meet for a moment, but I really don't know who she is.

"Umm… I'm sorry, but I need to talk to you for a minute. Is that okay?"

Even after hearing her voice, I still don't know who she is. If the first place, we haven't talked before or anything, and the girl seems unsure, too.

"Really?" My voice comes out sounding weird.

It's because I don't know this girl… She has two large eyes, a low nose, red cheeks that contrast with her pale skin, and a pin that holds her bangs to the side. Her smooth, undyed, black hair is pulled into a pin at the front. She's a bit taller than 160cm, she has a good posture, and her skirt is pulled above her knees to show her white legs. I never would've expected such a cute girl to visit me.

"Is it too inconvenient?"

I don't say anything, so she sticks her lips out in frustration. This action causes me to remember who she is.

"Kougami…" Finally remembering, I timidly speak her name.

"Oh, you remember me."

"Um… Yuriko Kougami-san… right?"

"You don't need to add the -san."

Apparently I was right. She smiles happily. Even if it's not as cute as Sakurako-san's, her smile is still very cute.

"I'm a bit down right now, though, since club activities have been suspended."

"Yeah… A bit, huh."

That's right, I remember. She belongs to the same tennis club as one of my friends. She was rumoured to be one of the best in our grade, but she suddenly stopped attending a few months ago. For some reason, I feel sorry for her.

She's cute, she was the student council Vice President in middle school, she seems smart, she's careful, and she's cheerful. She always hands our obligation chocolate on

valentine's day. I don't mention my depression when my family ate it. Standing right in front of her like this, I understand how Imai feels.

"S-s-so, what did you need me for?"

I'm surprised someone like Kougami would suddenly come to visit me. It's like we're from different worlds, but listening to her so far, it seems like she doesn't notice.

"I'd like to talk, just the two of us."

"Oh, right, you already told me that. That's no problem. What is it?"

Telling me the same thing as last time, Kougami gives me a bitter smile. Well aren't I an idiot? I try to hide my trembling as I reply.

"Yeah… Well, it's hard to talk here, so why don't we go for tea after school?"

Going for tea with Kougami after school?!

"That'd be good, it's been particularly cold today."

I let her words soak in, then nod. My ears might be turning red. My clenched hands are sweaty. Why would she ever want to talk, just the two of us? Maybe she's trying to make fun of me? At least she knows who I am…

"Thank you! After school, then!"

I don't know if she noticed my trembling, but she smiles as she waves to me before running down the hallway. Even though I think I'm a bad person, I can't stop myself from breaking into a smile.

Just as we planned, we head to one of Asahikawa's old tea shops after school. I've heard it was the first tea specialty shop in Hokkaido. It's a shop that sells a wide variety of delicious tea and sweets, so Sakurako-san (and also gran) love it. The inside of the store has a cozy, quiet atmosphere, like a mix between India and Britain.

The shopkeeper gently says, "to your favourite seat" as he leads us to a window seat at a round table. I'm feeling tense, so I take a deep breath and smile. Looking at her, I still feel tense.

"It's my first time talking with you."

"Y… yeah."

Her shy smile puts me at a loss for words.

"I often hear stories about you…" I say, as Kougami orders a chiffon cake set from the shopkeeper. While worrying about what I should be saying right now, I order roasted tea. It's an original tea. It's fragrant, sweet, easy to drink, and it's even good when it's cold.

"Oh, do you remember the cat in front of the school?" After the shopkeeper confirms our order and walks away, Kougami asks me a question.

"Cat?"

"It had been hit by a car and died. Everyone else hesitated to touch it, but it was amazing when you made a grave for it."

"Ah."

Although I couldn't remember before, I start to recall a cat being run over in front of the school gate last month. It was still a kitten, but the fact that it's internal organs were falling out of it's ripped abdomen made it obvious that it was dead.

"After all, I did feel a bit bad for it."

Everyone felt sorry for it, but it was no more than a bad feeling. I certainly didn't feel well,

but I also felt bad for it, knowing that it would just be run over by other cars. Maybe because of Sakurako-san, I'm starting to become immune to death.

Honestly, the remains of a kitten don't seem so bad compared to decomposing animals, chopped up animals, and corpses of humans. So I wrapped it in a handkerchief, carried it off the road, and got permission from a teacher to make a grave under the platanus in the schoolyard. I'm surprised she thinks it's amazing, but it's not much a topic for conversation, so we end up silent.

"…So, what did you want to talk about?"

I probably don't appear to be a smart guy, but I don't know what to talk about. The mutual silence continues, the pot of roasted Darjeeling tea is set down, and I can't stand it anymore so I ask something.

"… Is your chiffon cake good?"

She gazes at the line up of several types of cakes in a glass case, and answers bluntly.

"Huh? … Yeah."

I don't think that's what she came here to talk to me about… I feel a little discouraged and irritated. Of course she doesn't have many special feelings for me. If you're going to invite me to talk, you should at least have something to do, though. I have a somewhat short temper, so I start getting frustrated by how slowly the conversation is moving.

"My grandmother liked chiffon cake a lot."

"Is that so," I reply quietly while playing with the cloth covering the pot with my fingers. I'm starting to get a little bored.

I see Kougami tracing her finger on the red edge of the cover of the pot several times with her finger. A strange silence flows around us, until she speaks.

"I heard from the police that you found my grandmother, Tatewaki-kun."

I pour my roasted tea into my colourful tea cup, when Kougami suddenly says that.

"Huh?"

I almost drop the pot, and hurriedly put it down on the table. She sees what happened, so she closes her mouth tight and hangs her head in shame.

"So that's… The corpse in the news was your…"

"Yeah." Kougami nods.

I remember the bones I found were "Asa Kougami-san's". Kougami has the same last name. After thinking a bit, I should have guessed.

"So, thanks… I guess."

"Why are you thanking me, I didn't do anything!"

I suddenly feel embarrassed, stupid, and I want to hit myself. I guess Sakurako-san didn't voluntarily go with the police.

"But, that's right… I guess she was…"

I start shaking, but I'm saved by the chiffon cake. Looking at the fluffy chiffon cake, served with ice cream, fresh cream and fruit, Kougami smiles.

"Let's share it," Kougami says, pointing at the half of the cake she cut off.

I actually wanted to order a set, but I wanted to look cool, so I decided to be patient. It's delicious, but 1000 yen for a cake set isn't good for a high school student's wallet. I wait in anticipation as Kougami puts half of the ice cream in a tea dish, gives me a piece of cake, then

gives me half the fruit. I'm worried about whether or not I should refrain, but I can't resist my appetite, so I reach for a spoon.

"… She went missing last fall." Kougami mutters as she pours herself some Darjeeling tea.

"Umm… My condolences."

"It's fine, I said something unreasonable."

I become more impatient with her way of speaking, but I return Kougami's bitter smile.

"To tell the truth, I don't know how to reply." After she speaks, Kougami drinks a mouthful of black tea, and bites her lower lip. "Since suicide is different from dying of a disease, everyone keeps saying they're worried, and it's hard to keep comforting them. Honestly, I'm tired of it."

"Huh? Then it wasn't an accident…"

"Yeah… The police said suicide."

Separation is always sad. If it's not illness or an accident, but a death that they choose themselves, the feelings of the bereaved family members, and surrounding people are even more complicated and delicate. I've had a similar experience with people ending their own lives. Remembering Kiyomi-san and Hashiguchi-san, her lover that followed her, makes my chest hurt. The more you love someone, the more it hurts when you lose them. It's a like chain.

"But, even though it was shocking hearing that a corpse was found, I'm relieved. Me, my parents, everyone else are aimlessly trying to sort their feelings out. No, I'm not even sure where to start with sorting them." Kougami talks like she's not interested, but forces her face into a smile. "My grandmother probably knew that she was going to die, since there's no evidence that money was taken out of her bank account. There isn't a suicide note, but that's okay, since when she was alive, she never gave up…" As she talks, a large teardrop forms in her eye, so she covers her face.

I feel awful. If Sakurako-san and I hadn't found the corpse, she could have at least had hope that her grandmother was alive. I'm like the god of death. Some say a beautiful woman crying is lovely, but when I see someone crying, it hurts me. I want to help her, but suddenly her phone rings. Since mobile phones are prohibited in this store, she quickly wipes her tears and takes her call by the entrance of the shop.

I'm alone, so I pour myself some more black tea, though it's lukewarm and starting to thicken now. While I have it on hand, I top up her cup.

"I'm sorry, I have to go home already. I have something I have to do." Kougami says after she comes back, while I scoop some ice cream with my spoon.

"Oh, that's fine. I don't mind."

"I can't thank you enough. I'm sorry."

"But I… haven't don't anything worth thanking me for."

"No, I really appreciate it."

Instead of finishing, she pushes the rest of the cake set to me. In the end, the chiffon cake turned out to be mine.

"…Umm I… really… want to talk to you again, Tatewaki-kun." Kougami says, as she takes her parka off the back of her chair.

"Huh?"

My heartbeat starts to speed up.

“Well, umm… If you don’t want to talk with me again, we don’t have to.”

“Oh… In that case, why don’t we meet up in front of the Buddha this weekend?” I ask, while she puts on her parka.

I want to talk to her more, but beyond that, I also want to go to Asa-san’s funeral. I didn’t like hearing the story from the old police officer. I’d rather just hear it directly from her.

“Of course, if it’s inconvenient…”

“No, I’m sure my grandmother would be happy. My house is a bit hectic, though…”

“It’s not a bother? Is it okay?”

“Yeah, it’s really not a problem. I’m actually really happy.”

Since I got such a vague answer, I was worried that I was pushing her, but she’s smiling at me with red eyes.

“Oh, I see. There was another person with you, wasn’t there? Does that person have any plans?”

“Huh? Oh… Probably not, but…”

“I’d be happy if that person could join us as well. My mom said she wanted to thank you both. We could even go visit them…”

“No! It’s fine! At a time like this, the two of us would be a bother.”

I honestly don’t want to take Sakurako-san with us, and I think Kougami visiting Sakurako-san’s house would result in a very grave situation. I don’t know how Sakurako-san would react, and passing through a living room full of bones wouldn’t be a good feeling.

“Well, Saturday, then.”

“Yeah!”

It can’t be helped if she wants us both there. I’ll just visit, then leave before Sakurako-san can say anything. While thinking about these things, I go to see off Kougami. I was going to pay for us, but as she leaves the store, I notice that she already has. Well, I was really uncool today.

Part 4

“Why do I have to go, too?”

Sakurako-san has no interest in going to Kougami’s house. Gran seems angry that I didn’t greet her, so I guess she didn’t see me nod my head. Then, on Saturday afternoon, we arrive at Kougami’s house, much to Sakurako-san’s dissatisfaction.

“They just want to say thank you. During a time like this, don’t say anything unnecessary.”

“You’re talking like I always say unnecessary things.”

“No, I’m just telling you because we have to be careful,” I say clearly, while Sakurako-san glares at me.

“Really… Today I was going to work on some monkey bones that I got from the university.”

“We’ll just burn some incense, then we’ll go home soon.”

“Anyway, is the bereaved family member a woman? It’s normal at your age to be thinking

about girls at your age. It's a sign that you're healthy, I'm glad," Sakurako-san says bitterly, snorting through her nose.

"…Please never say that in front of Kougami."

She doesn't need to bring that up. I ring the intercom. Since I went to pick up Sakurako-san early, we arrive right at our promised time. As if she was waiting for us, Kougami opens the door immediately. She's wearing a denim miniskirt with a lace hem, a yellow flower pattern tunic that has puffy sleeves. It's much prettier than her normal uniform.

"Oh I… I thought the person we're with was a man," Kougami tries to hide the surprise in her voice. We take off our shoes in the pleasantly scented entranceway.

"Umm… I'd like you to meet Sakurako Kujo-san."

"Are you two… going out?"

"Huh?! N-no, it's not like that at all!"

Even though I said that, Kougami doesn't seem convinced, and looks at us suspiciously. Would it be that surprising for me to have an older lover? Well… as long as she keep quiet, Sakurako-san's beauty can't be beat by Kougami. I don't think there's a good balance.

"About Sakurako-san… She has a proper fiancé."

"Fiancé?"

"Yes. If I had to say… it's more like a guardian."

"She's yours?"

"No, I'm her's."

"…Tatewaki-kun?" Kougami blinks with curiosity.

"Well, it doesn't matter that much." I wave my hand as I put on my slippers.

Sakurako-san, who doesn't seem interesting in interacting with people, looks at the oil paintings that decorate the entrance.

"My grandfather made those paintings." Kougami says shyly.

"I see. They're good."

I look at the painting. It has two horses running on a ranch on it. Since Sakurako-san is interested, I thought it would be a picture of bones, so I'm surprised that it's an ordinary painting. I do know that Sakurako-san doesn't usually give out compliments, however.

"The horse's muscles are drawn very accurately, it's beautiful. I wonder if he drew it while observing a live subject."

"Really? Even though I see it every day, I never noticed." Sakurako-san seems to think of this as a compliment. Kougami seems shy, but she makes a proud expression as she traces the edge of the frame with her finger.

"It feels like it could start moving," I say, taking a closer look at the picture.

It's winter. The horse's white breath, the frost on it's brown and grey coat shining in the morning sun. It looks so alive that I can almost hear the sound of it's hooves on the snow. It seems Kougami's grandfather painted as a hobby. Oil paintings and hanging across the whole room. Most are paintings of animals, but some are landscapes. They're full of the familiar scenery from the outskirts of Asahikawa. The painting of a mountain in the evening is probably the Taisetsu mountain range.

Sakurako-san and I visit the shrine, then we're invited for tea in the living room. It seems that Kougami's mother, who wanted to thank us, is out running errands right now. I told

Sakurako-san we'd leave early, but she seems happy looking at the paintings, so I guess she's fine with waiting.

"I'm sorry. I think she'll be back soon…" Kougami bows her head as she apologizes.

"Was it bad timing?"

"My grandfather… needs nursing care. Today is his rehabilitation day at the day service centre, so my mom had to go help him bathe."

"Oh… Is that so."

"I think it takes a while to help with the bath... I'm really sorry. It usually ends in the morning, so I thought she would've come back by now."

Oh, that's it. When Kougami put her hands together and asked me to come, I was hesitant at first, but I kind of understand how she feels. It can't be helped that her grandfather is in nursing care and her family is busy.

"Don't worry. Neither of us have plans," Sakurako-san says.

I certainly don't have anything to do today, but I don't like her saying that like I have too much free time. It's better than her saying she wants to leave right away, though.

"Even though you have that monkey?"

"It's not like it's something I particularly have to do today." Sakurako-san answers my question while staring at the pictures on the wall.

"What's this about a monkey?"

I can't just talk about her plans to harvest and assemble its bones, so I just say "it's nothing" and smile.

"Do you like paintings?" Kougami asks Sakurako-san, who is standing by the couch, staring at a painting while holding a cup.

"I don't hate them, but I'm not particularly interested. I do like the paintings by your grandfather, though."

This is my first time seeing her interested in paintings like this. There are a number of paintings in her house, and I don't mean to say that she dislikes them all. I think she's compatible with art. Apparently Kougami's grandfather's art clicks with Sakurako-san.

"An elephant… how nostalgic."

I don't know much about paintings, so nothing amazing comes to mind, but the picture of an elephant above the phone somehow has a strangely nostalgic feeling. It's been a while since the elephant as the Asahiyama zoo died, but I loved that elephant when I was a child.

"Do you want to know why there's so many pictures of animals? My grandfather really liked to draw landscapes, but when he drew animals, my grandmother would be happy. I heard that he drew this at the Asahiyama zoo before it got so crowded."

"I don't really understand the picture, but if he drew it for your grandmother, then I think I understand a bit. It feels like… it gives off affection for the person who is looking at it."

I knew it. The model for this painting was Marumimizou, the elephant that I loved. I lift the corners of my mouth as I look at the elephants gentle eyes and long nose. I miss Marumimizou, but I feel like this picture honours her well. If it didn't, it wouldn't feel warm like this.

"Even though they're ashamed of me, I was close with my grandfather and grandmother." Kougami laughs, but her expression soon clouds. "That's why we didn't expect

this," Kougami mutters vaguely. She puts her teacup on her knee, and stares at her reflection in the tea. Perhaps it's not herself that she's looking at, but a memory of her grandmother.

"My grandfather collapsed with a stroke eight years ago, and his body has paralyzed ever since. It seems my grandmother didn't want to move from her house in Touma. My grandfather couldn't work, and left debt… But my dad paid it off for him." Kougami tell us the truth, uninterested.

I'm filled with deep sadness and anger, but say "you don't need to force yourself to talk…" expressionlessly. Kougami just shakes her head in refusal.

"My dad's restaurant is reasonably popular, so he managed to pay it, but he has to work more than ever. It seems it was hard for my grandmother to rely on us when it came to grandfather. She had been looking after my grandfather all alone."

Even I've heard of Kougami's family's restaurant in a guide book about western restaurants. Being on the same street as the zoo, and their 100% stewed wagyu beef hamburgers are what made it popular.

"I guess with the circumstances, it couldn't be helped…" I say to comfort her, but Kougami raises her face angrily.

"But what about finding out my grandfather has gone senile?! … I found out after my grandmother died. It was when his care worker came in the morning and he didn't know what was going on." Kougami bites her lip. "I bet my grandmother was tired of it. She couldn't put up with it anymore, but she never talked about it, then she just left the house…"

"Kougami…"

Her eyes start to turn red.

"I wish we had been more concerned for my grandmother. Truly ask if she was okay, doing things for her, chasing after her. That's why grandmother died, it's our fault!" With that, Kougami can't take it anymore and covers her face while she sobs.

I say, "that's not true", but it's a fruitless effort. Sakurako-san stands in place, looking at the painting, even though she sees Kougami is crying. A hand grabs the teapot, and pours some fresh tea into Kougami's cup. As if an evil spirit has left her, Kougami stops crying.

"Tears and blood have are made of the same ingredients, besides plasma. The water is released as tears, but plasma components remain, so the blood temporarily becomes thicker. So it's good to drink more after crying. If possible, have some salt as well." Sakurako-san offers a box of tissues and some more tea after Kougami stops crying.

I don't know what to say when someone is crying, so Sakurako-san ends up doing more comforting. Even if my fingers are dexterous, I'm really not dexterous in other places. The tea Sakurako-san brewed is honestly not very good, but it's warm.

The phone under the elephant picture starts to ring. It seems it's from Kougami's mother. Her grandfather's blood pressure is a bit high, so she called to say that they're going to the hospital. There's no helping the situation, so we'll just have to come back another day. I didn't know what to do about Kougami crying before, but I'm grateful.

"I'm sorry about today."

"No, it's fine. We don't mind."

Kougami's eyes are still red from crying. I wave my hand to deny it, but I notice that she's looking at Sakurako-san, not me. As usual, Sakurako-san is staring at the picture of the

horse while putting on her shoes, not paying attention.

"That's right. Just wait a moment." While standing by the door to see us off, she suddenly goes back inside the house. "Umm, if it's not too much of a bother, you can take this." She comes back after a while, holding a paper bag. "It's to say thank you, but maybe it's a bit strange…"

Kougami tries to give it to Sakurako-san, but she doesn't put out her hands, so I take it instead. I look inside. It's the painting of the horse that Sakurako-san liked.

"Is this okay…?"

"Yeah. My grandmother also liked horses, so I think grandfather would be happy if Kujo-san takes it."

"I see."

"That's why I want you to take it."

"That's good," I say, handing the painting to Sakurako-san. She looks at Kougami and I with surprise, then smiles as she takes the picture. Kougami smiles with relief for a moment, then her face stiffens, like she's decided on something.

"Hey, Tatewaki-kun."

"Yeah?"

"Could I ask one more thing of you?"

"I don't mind but… is it a favour?" It depends on what the favour is. I tilt my head to the side, and Kougami looks at Sakurako-san and I.

"Please show me the spot where my grandmother was. Please tell me everything… as much as you can."

"Huh?"

"I… want to know where and how she died."

"But…"

Kougami looks directly as us, speaking in a strong and clear tone.

"The police didn't tell me much, saying that I didn't need to know. Even so, I want to know everything." She says, but then rephrases a bit. "No, I definitely need to know."

"But that's-"

It has to be a sad thing for her, so why does she want to know so badly? I feel like I can understand where the police were coming from. When it's something sad like this, it's better to not know about it, but I have trouble putting it into words.

"It's no problem."

"Sakurako-san?"

Sakurako-san only speaks briefly, but Kougami nods.

"She says she wants to know. There's no reason for us to stay silent about it. The weather should be good tomorrow, so I'll pick you up in the morning. Is that okay?"

"But…"

"That's fine. Thank you!"

My confusion is drowned out by Kougami's reply. I don't want her to be even more upset… That's what I'm thinking, but I swallow my words. If it's possible, I don't want to see Kougami cry anymore.

“Tomorrow, 9am,” Sakurako-san says through the window of her car.

Filled with complex feelings, I see her reddened eyes disappear in the car mirror.

Part 5

The next day, Sakurako-san arrives several minutes late for her appointed time, with Kougami. Since I can’t leave them alone together, I go, too.

“Are you really okay?” I ask, but Kougami only nods. Her determination isn’t swaying.

“Even though I went to the limestone cave several times as a child, I didn’t know there was a place like this here. What were you two doing here?” Kougami asks curiously while we start walking along the mountain climbing course in the green park near the limestone cave.

“Ummm… I guess I wanted to do a little mountain climbing?”

As one would expect, I can’t say we were looking for dead animals.

“I see, Tatewaki-kun really does go mountain climbing.” Kougami nods with understanding.

“Is it that well known?”

“Yeah. Imai-kun told me that you go fishing and mountain climbing with your grandfather.”

“He’s terrible.” Imai is going to regret this. “He’s pretty in to cross bikes and playing the sax now.”

“Sax?” Sakurako-san, who has been quiet until now, turns back and answers.

“Was it that surprising?”

Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow and shrugs her shoulders instead of replying.

“He isn’t going to join the wind instrument club?” Kougami asks, puzzled.

“Yeah, he just plays jazz sometimes as a hobby.”

“Do you play jazz, Tatewaki-kun?!”

“…Would it be that surprising if I played jazz?” I answer, a little upset. Kougami smiles bitterly. I often see a jazz café on 4 jodori, but I never pay any attention to it. “After all, I don’t feel like it’s a choice young people would make.”

“Is the saxophone is related to your age? Do you think fishing and climbing are both for young people?!”

“That’s right.”

Kougami raises her voice like she disagrees, then laughs. Though I’m a bit reluctant, Kougami’s comfortable laughter makes me smile. The laughter soon stops, so we continue walking in silence.

“But still… how did my grandmother climb up here?”

It’s called light mountain climbing, and the slope is gentle, but walking up here was exhausting. After a while, Kougami takes a breath and looks up at the sky. The sky today is a deep, blue, summery colour.

“Just a little more,” I say.

“If you had to care for someone with half their body paralyzed alone, you’d have stamina, too. Nursing care isn’t easy, even for young people like you. She did that alone for many years.”

Sakurako-san has no malice. She just says what she thinks, she doesn't mean to sound rude or sarcastic. However, Kougami feels accused by her words, and her mouth bends into a frown.

"Sakurako-san."

"It's fine… It's the truth."

When I call out to Sakurako-san, Kougami grabs the cuff of my mountain parka to stop me.

"I live with my grandfather, so I'm very aware of how much it hurt my grandmother."

"It's only natural. Supporting another human being is never easy."

Kougami squeezes my cuff. She doesn't say anything. Kougami starts to cry a bit. I sigh while we continue to walk. Soon we can see yellow police tape between the trees.

"This is it."

Is it okay to go in when it's off-limits? I think, but as usual, Sakurako-san rudely enters the tape. For a moment, Kougami and I look at each other. Kougami's face stiffens, as if she's deciding something, but she follows Sakurako-san. It can't be helped, I look around before ducking under the tape and continuing down the path. The path is easier to to walk on than before, thanks to the police trampling the grass.

"Right here."

It's good that we didn't get lost. We step out into an open area. Sakurako-san points to the bottom of the cliff.

"It's such a lonely place…" Kougami mutters, as she walks around the area. The only other sound is the rustling of the trees.

"It's not a lonely place. It's a sunny, open area."

"But there's nothing here… The morning newspaper was still there, and the light in the entrance was on, so I was told that she left while it was still dark out. In the middle of the night… She came here alone to die… It's so lonely…" Kougami says quietly.

To be honest, I think so, too.

"This is where your grandmother fell. She probably slipped there."

Sakurako-san walks to the edge of the cliff, and looks at the top of the bare clay wall. Kougami follows, then crosses her arms as if to hug herself, and shivers. Just like normal, Sakurako-san explains in detail how she fell, and her condition. She's using so much technical language, that at first it looks like Kougami can't understand.

"Was she in any pain?" Kougami looks down at the crushed weeds where the body was. Her face turns pale as she asks. It seems the grass couldn't grow beneath the remains, so a distinctly human shape was left behind.

"A little bit, but it wasn't for very long."

"I see…"

It seems to have helped a bit, she sounds relieved as she mutters. However, that doesn't mean her sadness has been healed. She covers her mouth and nose with both hands, and takes a deep breath to try to hold back her tears.

"But… I wonder why my grandmother would bother coming here to die. I wish she could tell me why she decided to die in a place like this…"

I'm wondering the same thing. I've heard that this road has been closed for several years. I wonder why someone would bother going to such an unpopulated place to commit

suicide. Is it so she won't disturb people, like Sakurako-san said before? I look to her for an answer, but she only stares at us in wonder.

"What are you saying?"

"What?"

"Your grandmother didn't choose this place to die." Sakurako-san tilts her head to the side, not understanding what Kougami is saying.

"What do you mean?"

"My grandmother died here, right? Didn't she jump from there?"

We don't understand. She looks surprised, then laughs and snorts through her nose.

"Jumped? What are you saying? It wasn't a suicide, it was an accident."

"Huh…?" Kougami and I exchange glances.

"But even the police said it was a suicide!"

"Don't talk about stupid things like that. It can't be suicide," Sakurako-san says, as she spreads out her arms to show us. "Watch carefully" she seems to say. "Are you listening? The height of this cliff isn't even 10 metres, so about the height of a two story building. It's too low to attempt suicide. Isn't the stage in Kiyomizu temple 13 meters? The chance of surviving a fall from Kiyomizu stage is over 80%. At this height, your survival rates increase. Well, wouldn't someone who wants to die be better off jumping out of a second story window? When the area around it is so open, it feels higher than it does at the top. Is there a reason to choose a place like this to fall to your death? Wouldn't the roof of a house be better?"

(TL NOTE: There's a saying in Japanese that's along the lines of "to jump off Kiyomizu stage", meaning to take a jump, or do something drastic. It was said that if you jumped off the stage and survived, your wish would be granted. Over 200 people jumped off and about 85% survived.)

"That's…"

I can't find a reply. This cliff is definitely too low to consider jumping to your death. It seems that Kougami feels the same way. She stares at the top of the cliff, eyes wide.

"I'm positive that your grandmother climbed up that cliff, and fell. However, she didn't intend to fall. Her death was just bad luck. In this case, the height is only enough to leave bruises."

"Then why did my grandmother come to a place like this? The police said that suicide is the only reason!"

"It's simple. You'll understand if you climb up it."

"Huh…"

"Don't you want to know why?" Sakurako-san says, pointing to the rope that blocks the path up the cliff. By the time I look back, Kougami has already started to quickly walk up the path.

"Kougami!"

"I have to go."

I understand how she feels, but this is a closed path. It's dangerous to walk up. Kougami answers me with a serious expression, as if she had already thought this through.

"…Then I'll walk ahead."

I don't have anything else to say. At least she won't be in any danger if I go first. I can't

imagine how sad her parents would be if something tragic happened here. She probably hasn't noticed that.

It's obvious at a glance that nobody has been on this path in a long time. We climb the hill through knee high grass, careful about what might be underfoot. Kougami stays silent.

"Be careful of where you step," I call out to Kougami. She nods with a stiff expression.

I'm sure she's trying to smile back at me. The corners of her mouth raise a bit and her cheeks tremble. Fortunately, the plants and trees grows thickly along the path, so there's not much of a chance of slipping… it still isn't easy to walk, though. I walk ahead of Kougami a bit, leading her by the hand. Sakurako-san is used to walking along paths like this, from when she looks for dead animals. She walks ahead of us, without turning to look back.

"…!"

After climbing the gently sloped path for a few minutes, we start being able to see the rural landscape of Touma, and the snowy ridge. This is probably the part of the cliff that we looked up at from below. I understand why it's called the light mountain climbing course, now. If it was under different circumstances, I would have yelled in awe. The view is quite amazing.

"This is the last place my grandmother saw in the end…" Kougami whispers in a hoarse voice. When I see tears start rolling down her cheeks, I unintentionally look away.

"So then… What are you getting at here?"

Even though the scenery is beautiful, it doesn't seem to be the reason Kougami's grandmother died here. After looking around for a while, I finally ask Sakurako-san.

"Look there." She points straight in front of us.

In the direction she points, I see the blue sky over the mountain ridge, but I don't understand what she means.

"What is it, you guys? Don't you understand?" Sakurako-san stomps impatiently on the ground, staring at us. I look behind us, and use my fingers to make a viewfinder.

"What is it?" Then, I lose my words.

"Ah…" Kougami lets out a sigh. "My grandfather's picture…?"

"Probably." Sakurako-san nods.

It's the same scenery as one of few landscape paintings in the living room of Kougami's house. The red evening sun dyes the mountainous scenery.

"I've seen it over and over… and I didn't notice…" Kougami's voice quivers as she speaks.

"I see. So the picture of the sunset was drawn here." Sakurako-san frowns again while I talk.

"What are you talking about? Don't they teach you which direction the sun sets in school nowadays?"

"Huh?" I forgot about the oil compass. "Direction… Ah…!"

I hurriedly grab the compass. The magnetic needle spins until the red needle is pointing left – so North is to my left. "North is left? … Ah, then, this is East…?" I check the compass once more. We're facing East without a doubt. Of course, east is the direction the sun rises, not sets. "I see. The picture wasn't a sunset, but a sunrise…" Sakurako-san smiles pleasantly and nods, satisfied by my words.

"From here on, I'm only guessing. Asa Kougami was exhausted from caring for her

husband, so she took a breather and went to see the place he drew. Would I be correct in saying that she was with her husband when he painted the picture? Wasn't this a place of memories for those two?" Sakurako-san takes my compass and puts it back on her car keys as she speaks. "Anyway, it was still dark, but she still came this far just to see the morning light. The morning would've been better, but the footholds would be slimy. Anyway, some bad luck hit her, and she fell here, breaking her neck. Considering that there's no damage to her arms, I guess she fell on her head."

"Then… You're saying grandmother really came up here to see the sunrise, lost her footing, and died? It wasn't suicide, it was an accident…"

"What did I say? I'm guessing. This might not even be the right place. But, to me, your grandmother's behaviour doesn't indicate that she was in despair." Saying so, Sakurako-san taps her temple with her index finger. "When a human is exposed to morning sunlight, the brain starts to secrete serotonin. Serotonin, also known as the "happiness hormone", stabilizes the body temperature and rhythm. It also suppresses noradrenaline and dopamine."

"That's right… I got angry when I had less."

I remember Sakurako-san talking about this before with the medium at Shiyouko-san's house.

"I see. To put it simply, serotonin makes your mind calm and gentle. In other words, humans are prepared to get energy from the morning sun."

The morning sun gives you energy. Does that mean that the excited feeling you get on a clear morning is thanks to serotonin?… No, it can't just be that. The morning sunrise has always been a symbol of hope. I think of the name of my hometown, Asahikawa. The sun rising over the river, marking the start of a hot summer day, golden light shining over the river. The steam freezing in January, water lilies blooming on the icy surface of the water shining in the morning sun. I'm sure everyone is attracted to it by that beauty. It feels amazing, not hopeless.

"My grandmother was always a morning person. She loved going into the field first thing in the morning, to get energy…" Kougami's voice is wet with tears. Sakurako-san nods.

"I think your grandmother chose this place to inspire you. It wasn't because she wanted to die. She wasn't in despair. She came here thinking 'I'm alive'."

"She didn't kill herself. It wasn't suicide. My grandmother didn't want to die-"

Kougami finally falls to her knees on the ground, crying loudly. Knowing how much she was pushing herself makes my chest hurt. Even if it wasn't suicide, it's not like everything was "good". Even if her grandmother didn't commit suicide, she won't come back. She wanted to live.

"Your grandmother… really was unlucky." When I say that, Kougami stands up and nods several times.

"You're right, this isn't something sad. My grandmother was always trying her best, but…"

Parting with someone is always sad. Even if you know the answer, it only changes the shape of the sadness. It doesn't heal it. Maybe knowing the truth about her sadness made it deepen. I wonder if it was really a good idea to bring Kougami here. I look at Sakurako-san again. However, Sakurako-san doesn't have anything else to say to Kougami. She looks at the

far away mountains, with her usual nonchalant air about her.

Final part

Then, about a month later, Kougami and I visited a tea shop.

“The police looked over it again, and decided to rule it as an accident. My whole family is relieved.”

I splurged on a scone set, but it would be bad to leave half of it. In the end, Kougami said, “let’s split it in half.”

“My grandmother taught me that you’ll be happier if you share delicious things.” I can’t say that she’s wrong, it’s certainly better to split it in half and both eat it. I always competed with my older brother when we ate, but I think I finally see the light.

“I see. Anyway, it’s good that the police changed their decision,” I answer, while putting plenty of cream on my warm scone.

The outside is crunchy, but the inside is fluffy. I groan with delight, while Kougami smiles at me. Yeah, sharing isn’t bad. Her grandmother’s teachings were right.

“Yeah, but… Is Kujo-san acquainted with the police?” Perhaps it’s because we didn’t say anything while we enjoyed our scones, chiffon cake, and Sri Lanka tea, but Kougami suddenly speaks.

“Huh? Why?”

“The police knew who I was talking about right away.”

“Ah…” I give a vague answer, remembering the old police officer.

The police probably reinvestigated because of Sakurako-san and her uncle. I’m sure the old police officer was reluctant to do that. I feel like I can feel his frustration in my chest, just a little bit.

“What a strange person.”

“Sakurako-san is? Well… I can’t deny that.” Or maybe I can’t say it.

“But still, she’s also a nice person.”

“…Sakurako-san is?” I blow on my tea. Kougami smiles and nods. I’m amazed that it doesn’t just look like flattery.

“I wouldn’t say… nice. She certainly has different values than most people…”

“I… don’t think words are the only way to show kindness,” Kougami says, and nods once. I was going to say something, but I bite my own words.

“Kougami, aren’t you also... a bit strange?”

“Really? I don’t think that about you, Tatewaki-kun.”

“Huh? Is that so~”

Kougami laughs loudly.

“That’s right!” I say back. I end up getting tired from laughing so much.

“Oh yeah! I’m officially leaving my club.”

“Hm?”

“I thought it wasn’t good to only go halfway.”

“But…”

Kougami talks happily and smiles, as if she's telling a funny story, but leaving a club shouldn't be a happy thing.

"Oh, did you misunderstand? I'm not giving up tennis. I want to concentrate on caring for my grandfather, for now. I haven't given much thought about my future, but I'm starting to think I might aim for becoming a nurse." Kougami says as she adjusts herself in her chair. "I think that if I really want to do it, I can start from anywhere. I used to be greedy. I don't want to be without tennis or my grandfather. I think my family can continue forward, now." Kougami says in a dignified tone of voice. As she talks, there's no regret, or shame in her eyes, she's dazzling.

"… You're so strong, Kougami."

"I have a feeling my grandmother in heaven would be angry if I didn't persevere." Kougami takes a deep breath, as if she's made a decision. I really wonder how this woman can have such a strong resolve.

"I'm sure… I think your feelings are getting through to her properly – even in heaven."

"… I hope so."

I strongly nod, and Kougami smiles, though she looks like she's about to cry. She tightly seals her lips, and looks up without shedding a single tear.

"Well, I have to work hard then!"

Gran said once that your wish will come true if you stir tea clockwise three times, then stop the spoon for 3 seconds.

"May one or many of her wishes come true." I begin to talk happily, then look at Kougami, secretly hoping for her silver spoon to shine bright.

The Second Bone: Where Do You Live?

Part 1

In mid-July, the burning days are assaulting. This is because Asahikawa is in a closed area, completely surrounded by mountains. In the summer, the days are hot. In the winter, the air is cold and stagnant. Even with a difference in temperature between in summer and winter is 50 degrees, a lot of delicious crops are grown here.

Midsummer evenings. With so much humidity, even leaving the window open to let in the cold wind doesn't help. It's suicidal to go one night without air conditioning. To avoid the coldness of the winter, houses have airtight interiors, to lock in the heat. It's not an exaggeration to fear heatstroke during one of the sweltering nights.

I want to turn on my air conditioner, but as an online friend from abroad told me, less than 16% of people in Hokkaido have an air conditioner. Of course, there's no air conditioning in my house, either. Even though it's hot, the length of time that you'll need an air conditioner is short, and the winter is too cold to have one. I hear that in some places, outdoor air conditioning units will freeze. For that reason, many people in Hokkaido prefer electric fans to air conditioners. I honestly think that the air conditioning in a karaoke room is the only air conditioning you need. That's why, even though I don't have air conditioning, I still have a fan in my room.

My older brother, who has moved out, has luxurious things like a remote controlled air conditioner. I still feel like I can enjoy this hot, 30 degree evenings with my trusty fan.

That's what I thought, until 3am, it suddenly betrays me, and ceases to speak.
I try to turn on the power, and examine the fan, but it doesn't move. I can only guess that the motor or something is broken, but to me, these things don't make any sense. I won't be able to sleep again at this rate, so I go into my closet to look for an old electric fan, but it seems it has already been thrown out. Since I have no choice, I go into the living room where my mom is drunk and sleeping on the couch.

Since her acquaintance opened a shop recently, she went out to celebrate, but came home and drank alone. Even though she doesn't have a habit of drinking at home, she likes alcohol. I'm sure that she opened up some whiskey as soon as she got home. On the table is a half empty bottle and glass. Inside the ice pail is water left behind by the melted ice. I run to the fridge in a hurry.

"Dang! Et tu… Brutus…"

Just as I thought, there's no ice in the freezer's ice maker, and no water in the tank. I curse my mom. Even though it's such a hot evening, I can't even have a cold drink. It feels like the whole world is against me having a peaceful sleep.

"Geez, what is it?"

For a moment, I think about stealing the fan that "Brutus" is using, but I stop myself when I remember hearing that alcohol promotes heatstroke. I had prepared a bottle of barley tea for today. All the vending machines in the neighbourhood sell everything for 100 yen, but that means people buy all the 500ml cans during the 30 degree days. There's 350ml and 250ml cans, and I'm too thirsty to not drink anything at all. I feel like I lost a bit of money.

I think about walking a little bit more and buying a cheap drink at a convenience store. A convenience store would have air conditioning, and it's not a crime to go in just to cool off. With that logic, I decide to slip out of the house and head to the convenience store. I knew I wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep, but I didn't think the day would be this long.

Part two

Walking into the convenience store during a sweltering night is like paradise. To save energy, it's only cooled a bit, so it's comfortable rather than cold. My sweat immediately evaporates. Saying I'm not tired would be a lie, but I don't want to go back to my hot room. I throw some sports drinks in my basket, and head to the magazine corner instead of the cash register. It's the first time I've read a magazine while standing like this. The tired clerk seems indifferent to me. I feel more comfortable like this than when they pay too much attention during the day. Right now I wish I could stay here until they close… I think, but then I turn pale when I look outside.

"… Huh?"

It's dark outside, but I can see a small child walking alone.

"No way… alone?"

I think they're alone. I check the clock inside the store, it'll be 4 o'clock soon. Since it's summer, the sun will be up soon, but it's still not a time for a child to be walking around at. A small child shouldn't even be awake at this time. To put it in words, I'd even be worried about a child this age walking around alone during the day. I don't know exactly how old the child is, but I would guess about 2 or 3 years old.

I might just not be able to see their mom, and they're chasing the child. I think that they might not really be alone, so I look back to my magazine. I'm concerned and look outside again, but the child is the same, walking dangerously by the road. I wait for a little while, but no adult appears. I become more and more worried until I can't stand it, and quickly pay them leave the convenience store.

The child is on the opposite side of the road. Even though it's evening, there's a lot of cars, since it's a main road in Asahikawa. There's not as many as during the day, but there's still quite a few. Just as I thought, the child walks up to the curb, and boldly steps out into the street. They're not on the sidewalk anymore, so instead of running through the parking lot in front of me, I climb up the fence, and sprint with all my might.

"That's dangerous!"

I shout as loudly as I can. The child looks surprised, and stops walking. During that gap, I grab the child.

"Oof!"

Holding the child to my chest, I hit my head and shoulder against a utility pole. Behind us, a truck honks as it passes.

"Ah, that hurt…"

I see stars for a moment, but when I open my eyes I'm relieved to see the child staring back at me. They look surprised, but not hurt, or at least not in any pain.

"… Are you hurt?" I ask the child while rubbing my tingling head, but they shake their

head. “Huh? Didn’t you get hit anywhere?”

Listening with confusion, the child raises its hands with a face that looks like I attacked them. Apparently I grabbed them too hard. Even if I didn’t exactly do a good job… I’m amazed the child is completely fine. Anyway, it’s good I made it in time. If it wasn’t for the utility pole, I could’ve been a little bit like a hero. Well, I can at least finish cool.

“Hey, are you alone?”

They nearly had to be taken to the hospital, but it looks like they don’t even realize how dangerous that was. The child gets up, and starts walking again. Why is this child walking around alone? I grab their hand, squat down so we’re eye level, and ask them politely.

“Did you get separated from your parents?”

This question seems to be a bit too difficult for this child. They make a curious expression again.

“Did you get lost?” I don’t know how to make them understand my question. “Umm…” Well, I’ll bring them with me. “Alright. Will you go to the police box with me?”

It seems like she doesn’t understand what a police box is. Still, when I reach out my hand, she puts her small hand in mine. It may be small, but the feeling causes relief that she wasn’t run over to come up from the bottom of my heart.

My father died when I was small, and my mother never remarried, so I’ve never had a younger sibling. All my cousins are older, too. I don’t hate small children, I just never get to be around them much, so this is my first time being alone with one. So when it comes to unfamiliar children, I don’t know what to talk about. Even so, holding a tiny hand like this causes a feeling of duty to protect her to well up in me.

The child has a bob cut, and light blue pyjamas with a ribbon on their chest. They’re carrying a small backpack with black shoulder straps. I don’t know if this child is a boy or a girl. Based on their clothes, I think it might be a girl. I look down.

“Huh?! You’re barefoot?!”

Looking closer, they’re not wearing shoes or socks. It looks like they took the backpack and left the house as-is.

“Wow, you’re heavy.”

I hurriedly pick up the child, but they’re heavier than I had imagined. Are children really this heavy?! I’m surprised. I often see mothers holding their children, but they always look so calm while carrying this weight. I don’t remember clearly, but when I was little, I’d often ask my mom to pick me up while we were out of the house (and I still get laughed at for it by my older brother and grandfather).

I pick up the child and bring them to the police box. My arms drop immediately, but I can’t put them down. I switch to a piggyback, since it would be dangerous to let them walk on their own. They have been tired from walking, because they soon fall asleep in my arms and get heavier. I eventually arrive at the police box. Even if it’s only been 10 minutes, I’m still exhausted.

“Excuse me.”

I look into the police box, but I don’t see anyone inside.

“Yes, what is it?”

Just as I start to think that I’m in trouble, I suddenly hear a voice from behind me. I turn

around, and see an officer coming out of a police car. Apparently he was out on patrol.

"Sorry, there was a report a little while ago that there was a pervert nearby, so everyone is out right now. Did you wait long?"

He's talking to me in a friendly voice, like a friend that was late to meet up. He's looks like he's in his mid-thirties, and his hair looks like a bird's nest. Since he has charming facial features, casual tone of voice, and relaxed atmosphere, it helps me calm down.

"Umm… This child was walking around alone, so I brought them here."

"Alone? Do you know this child?"

After taking a look at the child, the police officer says, "well, have a seat" while pointing to a chair with his pen.

"No, I don't know this child. I was buying something at the convenience store, when I saw a child walking around alone."

"I see. I guess you wouldn't come to the police if you knew them. Anyway, at a convenience store at this time… aren't you a teenager?"

"Yes, but the fan in my room broke, so I wanted something cold."

"Well, I can't say that's very admirable." The police officer groans, while scratching his temple with his pen. "I guess it's better than collapsing of heatstroke, isn't it?"

"Well, I guess you could say that."

I'm still a bit upset about our conversation, but I put the sleeping child in the chair next to me.

"Well, it's a dangerous world, so it's better for boys to be careful… So this child was walking around? I haven't gotten any missing child reports, though."

"Their parents must be sleeping, so they haven't noticed. They're barefoot and in their pyjamas."

"Well… Have they really not noticed?" The police officer mutters, shaking the child awake. "Hey, little one."

Having been fast asleep, the child doesn't wake up immediately. After being shaken two, then three times, the child mumbles angrily. After watching in silence for a while, the police officer's patience runs out, and he pinches the child's nose.

"Officer!"

"Oh, why not?"

With someone this small, what if they couldn't breathe and died?! I hurriedly push away the officer's hand. Well, he may be an easygoing person, but is this bird's nest-head really okay? With that thought, a bit of anxiety runs through me. Still, the child grumbles awake, probably from all the noise I was making, and makes a displeased face.

"Hey! Little one, are you awake?" The police officer says, extending his hand towards the child.

"Little one," as the frizzy haired police officer said, looks around the police box slowly, like they don't know where they are. When they look at me next to them, they smile with relief. It's an innocent smile, like Sakurako-san's. Though, maybe it's just that Sakurako-san has a childlike smile.

"Alright, little one. I'm a police officer. What's your name?"

"…"

The police officer asks. Little one looks as him in confusion.

“Your name, can you tell it to me?”

After being asked again, little one nods. They seem to be thinking about something. It’s troublesome that we can’t return them home right away, but they seem to be happy.

“Well then, will you tell us your name?”

After the police officer asks again, little one says “I-cha”

“Iicha?” The police officer and I speak at the same time.

“…Could it be something like Ii-chan?”

“Do you mean Iicha?”

Is that her last name? I turn my head, puzzled, and look at “Iicha”-chan. Given that we’re in the age of freedom with naming, perhaps her name really is “Iicha”, but the pronunciation is unclear. There’s also a good possibility that it’s a nickname. For convenience, I’ll just use the name she’s given us, since it’s unlikely that I can deduce her real name from it.

“Well then, let’s call them “Ii-chan” for now.”

Now that we’ve arrived at the same conclusion, the police officer shyly asks “Are you a boy or a girl? A girl?” Ii-chan angrily hits their arms and legs against the chair.

“There’s no sound here!”

“Sound here?” (TL NOTE: She said “oto no koko chigau”, but meant to say “otonoko chigau”, meaning “I’m not a boy”)

I almost burst out laughing. Perhaps she meant to say “a boy” but misspoke. After hearing her cute mistake, I think about how we won’t be hearing her name and address, and let out a small sigh. When the officer lifts his head, he looks more troubled than me.

“Now, can you tell me if you’re a boy or a girl? Come on, I’m not good with little kids. I’m good with the elderly, though.“

“Officer.”

It seems like he’s the type to never stop talking. I give him a warning glance.

“Ah, that’s it, I don’t know what to talk to kids about.” This person isn’t very reliable. “I don’t understand! This is troublesome… I was hoping they’d at least have some kind of ID…”

I remember that Ii-chan has a backpack, so I ask, “can I look?” and pull of the shoulder strap.

“Iicha’s.”

“Sorry, it’s a cute bag. Can you show me the inside? I really want to see it.” I ask, slowly. I pull on the strap, but Ii-chan shakes her head at me.

Ii-chan looks angry, but the police officer smiles a bit. I give the officer a sidelong glance to make sure it’s okay, and pull her arms out of the backpack straps.

“Thank you.”

I thank her while taking her backpack. The fabric is fuzzy, with a panda design on it. It seems to be “well worn”, since the white parts are completely grey (though it could be said that it’s a more realistic colour for a panda.) There’s a frayed string coming out of what seems to be the back, and crusty rice stuck to it.

“So? Is there a name or something written on it?”

It seems the police officer doesn’t have much faith in me. He looks at the open backpack from behind me, frowning. Even though she got angry when we touched her backpack, does

she not care now that we have it?

"It'd be nice if there was something written on this."

I notice something red and sticky on the fastener. I know I have to investigate it, so I prepare myself before sliding it.

"Hmm…"

Inside, there's a plush penguin from the Asahikawa zoo (it's dirty, with stiff fabric), a package of pocket tissues, a toy cellphone, children's lip balm, and a sound making toy from a burger shop. However, out of all her belongings, nothing has her name or address on it, and nothing seems to have any clues to her identity.

"Have you not been asked to search for her yet?"

"Nobody has tried to contact me yet."

Ii-chan takes her "treasures" out of the bag, one by one, shouting "phone!" And "lip slick!" (though she actually meant to say lipstick). While watching her do this, a question comes to my mind.

"…Wouldn't a small child like this usually have a key to their house?"

"Well, maybe they don't have multiple keys."

"Oh, that's right."

Asahikawa is a city in a rural area. In Hokkaido, it's the second biggest city, after Sapporo, and the biggest city in the northeastern section. There's a Starbucks, and a big hospital. This is a major city in the area, but the roots of the citizens still have a steady, farmer attitude. The fertile soil and local foods are the pride of the people here, and with our self sufficiency, it causes a lot of people to have closed minds. Because of that, most people have their guards up around strangers, and are only social with family members. As a result, there's also low crime prevention awareness, so there's no announcements like "remember to lock up your house".

"She's barefoot, right? Even a little kid wouldn't forget shoes when she brought a backpack, right?"

"No, even if you ask me that…"

I listen, but the police officer wrinkles his nose and speaks in a deeply troubled, unreliable voice.

"Please be firm!" I unintentionally yell. "Geez… Please be a little more serious. Oh, wait a moment."

I ignore the police officer's irritation, and look at the child's bare feet. The bottom of her foot is stained a dark red colour.

"Huh?! Ii-chan, doesn't your foot hurt?!"

"What's the matter?"

"Her foot is hurt!"

"…You're right."

A dark red, viscous liquid seems to be dried to the sole of her foot. There's quite a lot. As I move my head closer, I start to smell rusty scent of blood. She was walking barefoot. She might have stepped on glass or something.

"Do you have a disinfectant?"

Before I even ask, the police officer already starts heading towards the back of the police

box. It seems he went to get a first aid kit. In the corner of the room, I find a small bucket and cloth, then I take the mineral water out of my bag.

"Just a minute, I'll wash it."

Ii-chan nods. I hope it doesn't leave a scar… As I slowly wash her foot, she suddenly pulls it away. I thought I hurt her, but apparently it was just too cold.

"It's cold." She says shortly, then laughs.

I'm surprised, but it's a good feeling. I'd rather have her laughing than crying. I carefully wash the bottom of her foot, but even after all the blood has been washed off, I can't find a wound.

"…Huh?"

Maybe it was her other foot? I quickly pick up her other foot. Unlike her red left foot, her right foot hardly has any blood on it.

"Here, this is a first aid kit. Is she okay? Should we take her to the hospital?" The police officer comes up beside me, holding the first aid kit.

"No… This is weird… It doesn't look like there's an open wound."

"You can't find one?"

"No… I just… I can't find it anywhere."

"That's strange. Did it heal?"

"I don't think that's possible."

It might have just been a small cut. Though there might have been too much bleeding for that. I carefully examine the bottom of Ii-chan's foot again. Still, as I said, I can't find a cut on her foot, even after the police officer checks.

"Maybe she stepped in it somewhere, then? Well, it's good that she's not hurt." The officer is optimistic.

"But… Wouldn't that mean that there's blood somewhere? To step in blood, and that much of it."

"Well, maybe it's paint, not blood."

"It's not. This is absolutely the smell of blood."

Even though I said that, am I really sure? I start to lose my confidence. It could be something that smells like blood. I really don't want it to be blood, but I have a bad feeling. Since I started hanging around Sakurako-san, I've had to smell it many times.

"Anyway, let me see if you're injured anywhere."

Since I can't be as optimistic as the police officer, and I'm still a bit worried, I decide to look over her whole body. Even though I don't like looking at little girls (rather, I'm weak to older women), I still feel awkward looking at a strange girl's body. Still, it would be bad if she was hurt somewhere other than her foot.

"…Oh."

I can see inside her clothes a bit while examining her arm. I find more red spots on the upper arm of her pyjamas.

"Just as I thought… This is blood, isn't it?"

There's marks like someone had touched her with blood on their hands. The hand is from someone bigger than Ii-chan, but the fingers are smaller and more elegant than mine. There's three small, oval shaped spots near each other, and one a bit further away.

“Isn’t it strange for a small girl to be walking alone at this time? Besides, doesn’t blood on pyjamas usually mean trouble?”

“Blood, huh… Shouldn’t we make a report?”

“It might not be a situation that needs reporting.”

The police officer seems skeptical about my opinion that it’s blood. I want to explain that over the past year, I’ve smelled blood countless times because of Sakurako-san, but I don’t. No matter how nice he is, he’s still a police officer. A sensible adult wouldn’t take to Sakurako-san’s hobby favourably, like I how I used to be. Plus it’s connected to crimes.

“Ii-chan, is your mom home?” After all, I need to get more information from her, so I ask more questions

“Aa-chan bedtime.”

Either because she got to sleep a bit, or if she’s just gotten more familiar with us, she seems to be in a better mood. She even smiles and laughs while she answers my questions.

“Aa-chan?”

“Aa-chan is okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“…”

I can see the police officer wants a translation, he covers his face with both hands like he’s troubled. I feel like running away right now. The officer and I struggle desperately for a translation.

“Umm… is Aa something small? Small, like a baby?”

“That’s it! Is it a baby sleeping in the house with your mom?”

I see! The officer hits my shoulder. It hurts! The officer and I look at Ii-chan as she nods. We’re relieved.

“Well then, Ii-chan, did you leave the house alone while your mom was sleeping with the baby?”

“Hop, bam!” I nod, satisfied. Ii-chan suddenly stands up on the chair and jumps off.

“Yeah? You jumped?!”

“Ah… So then, you climbed up on a chair and jumped out of a window. You’re very naughty.”

Ii-chan puffs with pride as she speaks. She’s delighted, as if telling us a heroic tale. The officer and I are a bit worried, and tell her to be safe.

“But really, I hear about accidents involving children that climb onto outdoor units, and fall off balconies. It’s really good that the room wasn’t too high up.”

Honestly, I’m also relieved. Not only am I glad that she was okay when she jumped out of the window, but she also wasn’t run over by any cars.

“So then, little one, you climbed up a chair while your mom and the baby were sleeping, jumped out the window, and left the house alone?”

Honestly, what a brat! With a bitter smile, the officer asks Ii-chan another question. She thinks a bit, then shakes her head.

“Yeah. Mama told Iicha babye.”

“Bye bye?”

“Babye.” She says, and waves her hand at me.

“… Your mom told you to go bye bye? So you left the house?”

She nods cheerfully, and raises her arms. The gap in her pyjamas shows her belly button. On her side is a large, purple and yellow bruise that has already started healing.

“… I don’t want to think about such a small child having something like this…”

“Ah, I see. Neglect should… also be a consideration. I’ll contact the child consultation officer in the morning.”

I guess we both thought of the same thing. The officer responded before I finished talking. At 8:45am the city child rearing support department opens. That’s too late. I can’t describe the anger and unease I feel.

“Would the morning... be okay?” I say, picking up Ii-chan and pointing out the brown stain on her arm. If this is really blood, it may be someone else’s, not Ii-chan’s.”

“Officer!”

The officer’s brow deeply wrinkles. He raises his bird’s nest head, and says, “it can’t be helped,” with a nod.

“It’s a long distance for a small child to walk. Why don’t we go around for a bit?” He tells me, getting into the police car.

“Anyway, is it okay if we go together, Ii-chan?”

“It seems she’s getting attached to you, so stay with us for a little longer.”

I know it’s a serious responsibility, but I also want to sleep, though I wouldn’t be able to, since I would be worrying and unable to calm down.

“Then I’ll accompany you.”

I pick up Ii-chan, get into the police car, and take a deep breath to prepare myself.

Part 3

Even though we say we’re searching, I honestly don’t know what to do. I don’t even know what direction the house is, and I can’t ask if anyone saw a child walking on the road at this time of night. The only information we could pull out of her was that there’s a park near her house.

“The child’s feet. I don’t think she can walk all that far.”

“How far can a child like this walk?”

“My older sister’s son is 4 years old, and he asks to be picked up after walking just a little bit.”

“Hmm…”

We arrive at the East side of the Nankou district, a rising, quiet residential area with lots of modern houses. The police officer and I start at the convenience store where I found Ii-chan, and search in a 1km radius around the nearby parks. Still, there’s lots of parks nearby, so it’s hard work. Every time we arrive at a park, I ask Ii-chan if it’s the one near her house, but she doesn’t understand. Before long, she starts to sleep peacefully. It must be because she’s surrounded on all sides.

“Maybe she came from somewhere further away?”

“A child, though? No, I don’t think she could walk for that long.”

“But she seems to be pretty tired. She could have come from further than we thought…”

Even though I say that, I’m honestly tired, too. Maybe it’s just because I’m awake at a time like this. I put my head in my hands.

“Hmm… Should we maybe extend the range of our search a bit?” The police officer asks. As usual, he’s not very reliable.

“It can’t be helped, I guess.”

In a situation like this, there’s no choice but to rely on him. I’d rather not rely on him during a time like this, so it’s frustrating that I have no choice.

“…Wait, could we go to my acquaintance’s house?”

“An acquaintance? Is it someone with kids?”

“No, but she might know something.”

That’s it. Sakurako-san always sees things that other people don’t. Since the roads are empty, we arrive at Sakurako-san’s house in about 10 minutes. I look at my watch. It’s 5am. Gran is probably awake, but this isn’t a good time to visit somewhere unannounced. Before ringing the bell, I hesitate a bit. There’s no way around it, and I’ve already come so far, so I can’t go back. It would probably be a bother to go in with too many people, so I leave Ii-chan with the officer at the car. I’d feel sorry for leaving those waiting in the car for too long.

I prepare myself, then ring the bell once. There’s no reply. It can’t be helped, so I ring it again. After a bit, I think gran is coming, but Sakurako-san is unexpectedly in the doorway.

“What is it?! Don’t you know what time it is?!”

“I’m sorry it’s still so early…”

Sakurako-san is very displeased. She looks at me, and questions me in a grim tone. From her messy appearance, I can tell she was sleeping until just now. She’s wearing a soft, white dress with exposed shoulders (probably in place of pyjamas).

“Actually, I met a lost little girl.”

“A lost child? Just take them to the police.”

“No, I’m looking for her house right now with a police officer, but we don’t know where it is. I thought that you could probably take a look at her, and find something that can identify her.”

Sakurako-san wrinkles her nose while scratching her white shoulder.

“…You can do whatever you want, just don’t involve me. I was working with bones until 4am. Right now, my body wants sleep, not a conversation with you.”

“You just have to take a look! It’ll be quick!”

Sakurako-san stands in the entrance, still displeased. While thinking about apologizing, I bring Sakurako-san to the police car, where Ii-chan is waiting. I hold the door open, while Ii-chan struggles to wake up. Seeing Sakurako-san’s angry face, I hurry to pick Ii-chan up.

“…So what do you want me to say about this child?”

“Something, just anything you can find about her.”

I pick her up to make her stand, but she resists, yelling “No!” I try to pull on her arms, but I’m worried her shoulders will tear off, so I take my hands away.

“Child, please stand up.”

“No! Iicha bed time!”

Standing in the entranceway, Ii-chan shakes her head. I try to grab her hand again, but I’m shaken off. She hides both her hands in her armpits so that we can’t grab them.

“It’s okay, there’s nothing to be scared of, so let’s do as the she says.”

Sakurako-san steps forward with irritation, while I try my best to hold Ii-chan up. Sakurako-san watches Ii-chan for a while, then goes back inside the house. She comes back out with a sweet smelling, red plum.

“Eat.”

Sakurako-san gives the plum to Ii-chan. Ii-chan takes the plum, then Sakurako-san pats her head. Even though she was speaking in a cold tone, she pats her gently.

“Stand up.”

Maybe it’s the sweet smelling fruit, or maybe it’s the pat on the head, but Ii-chan seems to be a little less scared of Sakurako-san. She obediently stands up, while biting into the soft plum.

“Hmm… She’s about 87cm tall… Can you jump with both feet? Try hopping.” Sakurako-san says.

First, she apparently wants to watch her jump. Why that? I urge Ii-chan to do it. After thinking for a moment, Ii-chan hops again.

“Good job.” Sakurako-san nods, then gives Ii-chan another plum as a present. “Generally speaking, someone should be able to jump with both feet at about 2 and a half years old. This child also spoke 3 words earlier. Since she can do that, she should be at least 3 years old, and able to say her name. A height of 87 centimetres indicates an age of 2 years and 4-5 months, though there’s individual differences, so I can’t say for sure. From all this, she should be around 3 years old. It could be a congenital short stature, or an individual difference, but we can’t rule out poor nutrition and lifestyle.”

“Actually… She has bruises on her body, and there seems to be blood on her, though we don’t know who it’s from.”

“Blood?” Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow.

Before Sakurako-san can investigate Ii-chan’s body, a loud yell echoes from the back of the house.

“Miss! In a state like that!”

After that amazing yell, gran comes out. Without waiting for a reason, gran glares at Sakurako-san. Before I can explain, she pulls Sakurako-san into the house, and shuts the door.

“Umm…” My words are in vain. “It can’t be helped…”

At least we know that Ii-chan is about 3 years old. Even Sakurako-san probably wouldn’t be able to determine anything else. I droop my shoulders with disappointment, and lead Ii-chan back to the police car.

“Well, isn’t it good that we know her age?”

The police officer talks about what Sakurako-san taught us with a smile on his face. What an optimistic person. However, I’m feeling down that I couldn’t do anything.

“I guess, but…”

I would like to find this child’s house soon. The frustration is bothering me. What if this child doesn’t know where the house is? And what about if her parents kicked her out of the house, or it’s painful to think about?

I watch Ii-chan eat her delicious plum. Even as a complete stranger, little kids cute. Each time her small body moves, it’s awkward. You can see how much weaker she is than an adult.

Won't she break if I hold her? Aren't people anxious about hurting them? After all, parents are still people.

"Here"

Suddenly, Ii-chan gives me a half eaten plum. She already ate half, though. No, maybe it was sour and hard to eat around the pit, so she wants me to finish.

"Th… Thanks."

I don't want to just refuse, so… I smile bitterly and pretend to eat it, but hide it instead. Ii-chan laughs, satisfied, and continues to suck on the plum. It can't be helped, so I continue to search for Ii-chan's house in the Nankou district. I've decided to extend my range a little more. For now, we head for the biggest park in the area.

Ii-chan is really happy, and runs to the slide right away. This seems to be her favourite park we've visited. It seems it isn't the one near her house, though. There's a couple walking a big dog. It seems that Ii-chan hasn't seen one before. I start to say, "let's go…" but she shakes her head.

Ii-chan is barefoot, but there's a pair of yellow boots that have been left here for a long time now. It seems that they're lost, so is it okay to take them? They've been here for over 5 years, and I'm with a police officer so it's okay! After five years, the owner surely can't even put these boots on anymore. They fit perfectly on Ii-chan, she's overjoyed. Though boots aren't the shoes she should be wearing while running around and playing. As one would expect, she falls down several times.

To other people, it probably looks like I'm just on a walk with Ii-chan. I suddenly hear crying. It seems she tried to play in the sandbox, but slipped. Just when the police officer tells me not to take my eyes off her while he asks other people about her. I rush over to her.

"Are you okay?"

"No!"

I try to pull her up by her left arm, but she shakes my hand away. Such a small arm is hidden in her pyjama sleeves.

"Oh, am I not allowed to grab this arm?"

I hesitate to grab her arm. She holds out her right arm, so I grab it to help her stand up.

"No, don't."

Her face crumples as the police officer comes back. It seems none of the people passing by know anything about Ii-chan. This is a serious situation.

"This is troubling."

"What time is it, now?"

"It's just past 6."

"6, huh…" The government offices will open soon… I start to feel like giving up, but then my smartphone suddenly rings.

"Yes."

Surprisingly, it's Sakurako-san.

"It's me."

"D-do you need something?"

"Where are you right now?"

"Huh? Oh, Lavender Park, but…" I check the signboard at the park entrance before

replying.

"I'm going there, so don't move."

"Huh?"

As usual, it's a one sided conversation. Even if I tell her the name of the park, does she even know where it is? Still, there's no way for me to contact Sakurako-san now, since she doesn't have a cellphone.

"Did something happen? I guess we have no choice but to return to the station for now." The police officer says.

"No, that's…"

How can I explain in a way that he can understand? If I say that Sakurako-san is coming, I get the feeling he'd say, "so what?" and go back to the police box. Anyway, is Sakurako-san really going to come here? Despite my uneasiness, I need to buy about 10 minutes for her to get to the park. Since it's causing so much trouble for me, I hope Sakurako-san can make it. I really hope she can. That's right, this will definitely be okay. Since Sakurako-san is a person who always discovers "bones". (TL NOTE: This is likely referring to an earlier chapter, where they said "the truth is like bones" or whatever)

Part 4

Just as I start feeling like giving up and going back to the police box, Sakurako-san's car starts to pull up. I had been worrying about if she really knew where the park is, but she seems to have used her car navigation system. They're useful worldwide.

"Honestly. Did you have to completely wake me up?"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't know what else to do."

This must be the first time I've been glad to see Sakurako-san.

"Umm… This is my acquaintance, Sakurako Kujo-san."

The police officer has been waiting in the car for a little while now. I point to Sakurako-san, as she rudely slams the car door, and introduce her to the police officer.

"Uh, I'm Hiroki Utsumi!"

The police officer, who has been sleeping until now, suddenly stands up and bows. I guess he didn't expect the person I was waiting for to be so beautiful. Especially since she's wearing an outfit that gran picked out. She's wearing an organdy top, a cute, knee-length denim skirt with a zipper in the middle. Her light makeup and simple outfit make her look unusually mature.

"… By the way, I don't think I ever introduced myself."

He's Utsumi-san… I feel like we didn't introduce ourselves to each other. When I point it out, he apathetically responds with, "oh, yeah". Sakurako-san seems to have all of Utsumi-san's attention. She certainly is beautiful, as long as she's quiet. I clear my throat, and Utsumi-san looks at me. When I say my name again, I get a weak response.

"It's a pretty old name, but it has a nice meaning. It's like a historical drama."

"I got it from my great grandfather's name."

My name was inherited from my great grandfather. My great grandfather was an honest man, but his family had a lot of struggles and loss. He always told me "Humans have to lose a

bit in order to live properly. Otherwise, you can't think of profiting."

"So, where's the blood?"

"Ah, it's… on her clothes."

Sakurako-san doesn't seem to be interested in the origin of my name, and Utsumi-san doesn't seem to even be interested in my existence, so I look to Ii-chan.

"There's no mistaking it."

Ii-chan sits down in the sandbox, and uses a scoop that somebody forgot about to play in the gravel. I force her to stand up, while Sakurako-san squints at her.

"Hmm." She puts her nose near the red stain. "I see. As you said, it's likely blood. Well, I can't tell if it's from a human or not."

"So it's not necessarily human, right?"

If you think about it, it couldn't be human blood. Even if a situation where someone is hurt isn't exactly peaceful, it would still be a bit better if it wasn't a human that's hurt.

"But there's no doubt that there's traces of human hands. Perhaps a woman. Although there's individual differences, a woman's ring finger is shorter than her index finger. Well, like me, some women have longer ring fingers." As she speaks, Sakurako-san shows us her hands.

Sakurako-san's index fingers and indeed longer than her ring fingers. It's the same for me, though there isn't much difference for me.

"Is that somehow related?"

"The amount of male hormones a fetus receives decides the length of the ring finger. People with longer ones are more manly."

I see. Sakurako-san certainly isn't… very feminine.

"Hmm."

Sakurako-san watches how Ii-chan moves her arm.

"Did something happen?"

"No, I just noticed one thing."

When she noticed Sakurako-san is staring, Ii-chan hides her arms.

"Sorry, but you have to show me your left elbow."

"No 'ay!"

I think that means "no way".

"Icha said no 'ay!"

"Why? Does it hurt?" Sakurako-san narrows her eyes. "Does it still hurt? It shouldn't now. Is it uncomfortable?" She says, kneeling on the ground and gently holding one is Ii-chan's fists. "Let's promise. I will absolutely not do anything that hurts you. But, I have something I want to confirm."

"Ii-chan, it's okay."

I don't know what Sakurako-san wants to confirm, but I encourage Ii-chan to go along. Sakurako-san doesn't try to rush Ii-chan, she just waits motionlessly. Ii-chan looks very angry, and is glaring, but eventually she holds out her left arm.

"I noticed it when I saw this child a while ago. Doesn't she seem awfully protective of her left arm?"

"Yes. Now that you mention it, she wouldn't let me hold her left hand."

"Hmm. It seems that she has broken her elbow in the past. Look, right here. If you look,

her elbow curves inwards.” She says, gently stroking Ii-chan’s elbow down to her pinky finger. “It looks like she broke the joint in her left elbow. An avulsion fracture is when the bone is broken in a way that crushes the joint at the end, causing the bone fragment to not fuse. It can interfere with join movements like this.”

“Bone fragment?”

“Bones are structures that grow and regenerate. Do you at least understand that there was a problem with it regenerating? When joints move, they’re pulled by muscles and tendons, but when you pull too strongly, it can pull them off the bone. If it’s not properly treated, it can interfere with moving like this.”

“If you pull too strongly… you say?”

Ii-chan’s arm is definitely turned inwards. Compared to my arm, it’s clear to see. I stretch my arm out straight. For me, my thumb is outside the elbow, but her’s is inside. Sakurako-san seems to know a lot about bone fractures in children. “Pull too strongly”. Those words violently echo in my head.

“This is cubitus varus. Fortunately, it won’t interfere with her everyday life, and it won’t be painful, but it’s uncomfortable. I think the memories are the most painful part of it.”

“Wow, you can tell that much just from looking?” Utsumi-san’s voice is full of admiration.

That’s right, this is Sakurako-san’s area of expertise! I’m proud, like it’s my own achievement.

“Have you made any other significant discoveries?”

Information about her condition could lead to figuring out who she is. Sakurako-san seems to think something about that is strange.

“Other discoveries? Isn’t it obvious from just this?”

“Huh? Oh, no. If possible, I’d like to find out who this girl is…” Utsumi-san’s troubled response is met with Sakurako-san’s blunt expression.

“You really are slow.”

“Huh?” Utsumi-san and I speak at the same time. How can an old bone fracture lead to finding Ii-chan’s identity…?

“Avulsion fractures usually don’t hurt much, but that doesn’t mean it won’t hurt at all, or swell. A normal mother would take her to be examined at a hospital, at least once. She would have fractured it within the last 2 years, so ask the local orthopaedic clinics if they’re treated a girl around 3 years old."

“Hospital…!”

We stare in amazement, until Sakurako-san clicks her tongue impatiently. How could I not see something so simple? But that’s it, the hospital!

“That’s right! The hospital has the patents’ names and addresses!” Utsumi-san and I look at each other as we speak in unison.

Utsumi-san says, “we did it!” as he lightly taps my shoulder with his fist. He goes to the police car to start contacting all the nearby orthopaedic hospitals.

“Are you sure she was 2?”

“She seems to have clear memories of the event. There’s no doubt that it happened after she was born. That’s why I think it was in the last 1-2 years.”

“Umm, well, it seems she lives near a park, but we’ve searched all the parks within about

1 kilometre."

"1 kilometre?" Sakurako-san folds her arms as she thinks for a moment. "There's varying opinions and theories, but children can generally walk about the same number of kilometres as their age. For example, a 3 year old can walk for around 3 kilometres. It just takes about twice as long as it does for an adult. For now, I think you should extend your search to 3 kilometres."

"3 kilometres…"

With such a small body? I look at Ii-chan. Kids are amazing. I'm surprised. I'm also surprised that Sakurako-san knows so much detailed information about children. However, it's not like she has a secret child… That just doesn't seem likely. Perhaps it's just part of her miscellaneous knowledge.

Sakurako-san and Ii-chan are together, and Utsumi-san is calling the hospital. I pet a dog that's being walked, then kneel on the ground to look at a beetle.

"That's a red breasted carrion beetle. I sometimes see them, since they eat dead bodies."

"Hmm"

I'm a bit worried about what she's teaching this child, but I guess it's fine. Maybe Ii-chan won't understand what it means. Maybe it's because her smile looks like a child's, or maybe it's because of her carefree personality, but Sakurako-san seems to fit in well with children. Ii-chan also doesn't seem to dislike her. I sit on a bench, thinking about the two of them as my battery starts to die. Utsumi-san's voice echoes through the park, saying, "I found it!"

"I found it! Kanjousen private hospital!" Utsumi-san's shouts excitedly from inside the police car.

Since it's still early in the morning, I'm worried about the people who live here, but I also can't help feeling excited. Along with my lack of sleep, my heart is racing.

"Did you really find it?"

He rushes over to us, smiling and winking with a thumbs up. He looks like the main character from a movie. Why does that make me laugh? I realize that he wanted to look good in front of Sakurako-san, but I honestly think it had the opposite effect. She isn't even looking at him in the first place.

"We should go there now. It's near the convenience store where Tatewaki-kun found the little one."

"Huh…"

"What is it?"

"There's an orthopaedic hospital near the convenience store…?"

What a coincidence. That hospital is none other than the place that I rescued Ii-chan from the truck earlier. The clinic really isn't very far from where I met Ii-chan. It's an old clinic that's not far from my house. When my older brother was a kid, he fell on the jungle gym and cut his forehead, so my grandmother brought him to this clinic. I haven't visited since it was renovated, it looks beautiful now. When we arrive, we're greeted by the young head doctor, and his wife, a middle aged woman who is also a nurse.

"Well, I'm sorry we're here so early in the morning."

"No, no, I just hope we can help you."

Utsumi-san and the young doctor bow. I quickly do the same.

“Oh, I remember this child.” From behind us, the head doctor’s bright voice echoes.

“Huh?! Do you really?”

“Yes. She was singing cute songs in the waiting room.”

The head doctor’s wife laughs and smiles at Ii-chan. It seems Ii-chan is shy, she hides behind Sakurako-san’s legs.

“I can’t show you the chart directly, but… This is probably the child.”

With that, the head doctor takes his glasses out of his pocket, and looks at the chart in his hand, which seems to have been left on the reception desk.

“She’s visited twice, but… then she stopped.”

“Right. The medical treatment was insufficient. It has become varus elbow,” Sakurako-san says.

The head doctor raises his eyebrows a little, and confirms with Ii-chan’s left arm. Ii-chan tries to hide her arm and escape from the doctor. The head doctor’s wife helps, and they look at the affected part.

“… It seems the bone wasn’t examined right away when it was treated originally. Since there’s a high possibility of remaining after effects, she should have at least had rehabilitation…”

“We were worried, so we told her to go to another hospital, but…”

The head doctor and his wife exchange glances. Perhaps Ii-chan’s mom didn’t take her to another hospital and stopped treatment.

“Will it heal?” I ask.

“It won’t heal naturally. There’s a possibility of an operation helping it, but… Well, fortunately, this disorder won’t impact her life. There doesn’t seem to be paralysis, and she’s right handed.”

“Since she’s a girl, I think she might be worried that it’ll stand out if she wears short sleeves when she’s older.” The head doctor’s wife says immediately after.

It’s certainly fortunate that it’s not her dominant hand. Still, nobody thinks this is a good situation.

“Here’s her address and name.”

Anyway, it seems that her identity has been confirmed, due to her distorted arms, and the head doctor’s wife remembering her. They’re usually strict with giving out personal information, but since we’re with a police officer, the doctor gives us a note with her name, and address.

“Yuuka Tominaga… chan?”

“Ya!” Ii-chan cheerfully replies.

The furigana says Yuuka Tominaga. (TL NOTE: furigana is the little symbols on top of more complicated ones that tell you how to pronounce them.) I was kind of expecting it, but it’s nothing like “Ii-cha”. Utsumi-san and I let out a laugh.

“Ah, darn! Her house is towards the municipal housing area. We should have extended our range a bit more.” Utsumi-san groans with regret.

Her address isn’t very far from Lavender park, which we were just at.

“Well… Since her mom had a really big stomach, I’m sure things aren’t easy for her… Even so, she still gave the impression that she didn’t care much about her child.” The head doctor says with worry as I chase Sakurako-san, who is walking back to the car.

Our expressions are cloudy. I wonder if it would be better for Ii-chan if she went to live in a different house, instead of going back home. If Ii-chan's mom doesn't care about her, maybe she does even more cruel things. Still, we have to visit Ii-chan's house, no matter what shape her home is in. I have to find out how the blood got on her.

"… Utsumi-san, please hurry." I say while tying my sneaker laces.

Utsumi-san nods strongly. Just a little longer until we get to Ii-chan's house.

Part 5

Ii-chan's house is in an emerging residential district, with several one story houses, and one municipal house. The police car stops nearby. When we stand in front of the house, Ii-chan smiles.

"Here?"

When I ask Ii-chan if this is her house, she smiles. There does seem to be a park at a kindergarten nearby. Since we only searched public parks, we didn't find it. Ii-chan's house is at the end of a row of houses. "Tominaga" is written in roman characters on the nameplate. Near the entrance, there's a tricycle and a bucket in some sand. Utsumi-san takes a deep breath, and pushes the doorbell. I can feel his tension.

"Hmm."

No matter how many times we ring the doorbell, nobody answers. I want to go into Ii-chan's house now, but we have to wait for someone to come out.

"…Nobody is coming out."

"I wonder… if they're out right now."

I look at my watch, it's 7:45 am. Even if it's summer vacation, it's still a normal weekday, so they could be at work or something.

"Did something happen?"

Someone speaks from behind us, making us all exchange glances. It seems to be an old lady from the neighbourhood. She's wearing a dress that looks like a Hawaiian muumuu, and carrying a bright yellow garbage bag.

"I protected her in the street, do you know this girl?"

"Oh, Tominaga-chan. Good morning."

Instead of answering the question, the lady gives Ii-chan a peace sign. When Ii-chan sees, she makes a cute peace sign back. The lady laughs at the cute gesture. Perhaps they greet each other like this all the time.

"Protect… Did you find her walking around by herself?"

"Yes, quite far away."

"Oh no, that's dangerous. It's good that she didn't get in an accident."

When I reply, the lady looks relieved, but Ii-chan's face crumples. I look up at the entrance to Ii-chan's house.

"Just wait, they're probably still sleeping." The old lady frowns. "What were they doing, making so much noise from the evening all the way until morning? Anyway, they'll probably be asleep until noon. They're always being noisy, regardless of the time. I'm worried about if they're taking proper care of their child." The lady lowers her voice a little while she says that, then

starts to walk away.

Did she want to take out the trash, or did she just want to complain about the Tominagas? We chase after the lady, so we can hear more of her story.

“I don’t mean to say that young people take bad care of their children, but if they have time to do their nails, they should have time to take care of one child. The youngest daughter’s father isn’t in the family register, and I hear he doesn’t even have a job.”

As usual, Sakurako-san has no interest in the conversation.

“They’d be fine on their own, but their poor child. Even before this-“

Leaving the lady to Ustumi-san, I quickly turn back to Sakurako-san.

“It’s unlocked.”

“Even so, opening it without permission…”

“I can smell blood.”

“… Hm?”

Sakurako-san slowly turns the doorknob to confirm that it’s not locked, then quietly pushes the door open. At the same time the door gives a small click, the scent of blood floods out with the damp, hot air. That powerful, intense scent of blood, and the scent of death. I turn away, and vomit the bitter gastric juice that flows up from my stomach under the eave.

“Death.” Sakurako-san says as she snaps the nitrile gloves that she carries in her pocket on her wrists.

“Utsumi-san! We have a big problem!” I shout, panicked. Utsumi-san’s expression freezes.

My voice and expression has an unusual feeling to them. Sakurako-san has already opened the door and gone inside.

“Excuse me, I need to go for a little bit. Is it okay if I leave Tominaga-chan here while I talk to her parents?” Utsumi-san says, while he leaves Ii-chan to the old lady. The lady nods in agreement.

“Yes, that’s fine. Well then, officer, could you tell them to think a bit more about their child? I know it’s hard on your own with nobody to rely on. Let them know that I can babysit anytime.”

Utsumi-san hurries back while saying “right”, “yes”. The lady calls out, “tell me if there’s something I can do!”, so I say, “make breakfast for her,” and go to Ii-chan’s house. It will honestly help. We probably, no, we definitely can’t show Ii-chan the inside of her house.

“Utsumi-san”

“Ugh…”

I enter the house with Ustumi-san, but he begins vomiting in the entrance. I thought a police officer would be… more accustomed to enduring the scent of a dead body. It seems that the interior was sealed up, so it got hot. It’s so warm inside that the thick scent of decay is overpowering.

“Terrible…”

Looking around inside, the room is a mess, things are scattered, and there’s traces of blood splattered.

“Sakurako-san, we can’t…”

She has already begun investigating the room, carefully confirming the blood on the door

and walls. I pull the collar of my T-shirt over my nose without uncovering my stomach while I talk. But, I know she won't listen to my reasoning.

"Horrible… this is… too cruel…"

Utsumi-san is standing in the entrance, dumbfounded while looking around the room.

"Come here." Sakurako-san goes into the kitchen, then immediately turns back to the living room to beckon us.

"… Utsumi-san!"

Since it was built a long time ago, the layout of the house is somewhat old-fashioned. The kitchen is separate, not right in front of the door. There's a dining table with lots of things scattered on it. Below it, there's a person curled up on the ground. An adult woman. Her back is dyed red.

"An ambulance!"

"Too late, she's dead." Sakurako-san says flatly.

This sight becomes worse when I notice that she looks like a baby curled up like that. However, it's an adult woman curled up in front of us. Her beautifully decorated nails shine in the morning sun.

"Postmortem lividity has appeared. I would say over 2 hours have passed since her death. The temporomandibular joint has stiffened, and stiffening can be seen in the limbs as well… It has probably been around 4 hours."

"K-Kujo-san…?"

After calling for a patrol car and ambulance with his radio, Utsumi-san is surprised to see Sakurako-san inspecting the body. He asks me who she is. Even if he asks, I can't explain it. Sakurako-san doesn't notice our bewilderment, and continues to investigate the body.

"The cause of death… there's no need to investigate that. She was stabbed in the back many times. Those wounds… They're probably from a kitchen knife. Stabbing repeatedly like this is often because of a grudge, but it can also be because the offender is afraid. If they're worried that the person isn't really dead, they'll stab many times. Careful." Sakurako-san says, as she measures the scars on her back with her fingers. It looks like her wounds reach to her chest.

"…Are there no self-defence wounds?" Sakurako murmurs, looking from her chest to her back.

"Sakurako-san?"

"Why? Why didn't this woman protect herself? A friend… Maybe it was an acquaintance?" She's probably just talking to herself.

It's like she's completely forgotten my existence. She blinks for a moment, then shakes her head.

"Even if it was an acquaintance, if someone points a knife at you, wouldn't you normally resist?" Sakurako-san puts her hand to her lips, then looks around the kitchen again. "There's only blood around the kitchen. The living room has very little blood. It's only inside the front door and the door to the bedroom… Why is that?"

"That's… because she opened the door, isn't it? She probably got stabbed there, too."

"Definitely… The woman only has one cut on her arms." Utsumi-san says.

Sakurako-san takes one more look at the corpse, then rushes into the living room.

“First she… was cut by someone at the front door, so she closed the door and put on the chain. Maybe there was a chance they could get in from a normal lock, like if the person has a key.”

Sakurako-san acts out her description by protecting herself with her right arm, closing the door with her back, and touching the chain. There’s a spot of blood where she touches. The chain has already been ripped off and broken. The criminal must be quite strong.

“Then, she took her sleeping daughter to the kitchen to escape…”

She goes straight ahead, then touches the bedroom door. There’s also a blood spot here. Sakurako-san goes back into the kitchen, as if she’s chasing an invisible child.

“Look, there’s blood on the chair. This is a child’s footprint, and there’s another one on the window. Maybe the child stood on the chair in order to escape out the kitchen window.”

That seems to be the same as the story Ii-chan told us before. As expected, this person is amazing. Even though Utsumi-san and I are surprised, Sakurako-san still looks troubled.

“Why didn’t she escape, too?”

“Huh?”

“Why didn’t they escape through the window together?”

“Wh… while the child was escaping, maybe the criminal broke into the room?” Utsumi-san says.

It looks like Sakurako-san doesn’t agree with this reply. She looks for the correct answer while looking around and walking through the kitchen. Then, her foot hits some fallen garbage.

“Ah! Why is the floor such a mess?!” Sakurako-san yells.

It’s no wonder she’s irritated. Ii-chan’s house is a mess. It looks like a hurricane came through here… It was probably like this before the incident. The table is covered in empty convenience store containers. There’s mold in the corner, and a cup with a brown liquid in it. The woman’s corpse is curled up in such a filthy place.

“…What?” But I get a little bit uncomfortable looking at this scene.

“What is it?”

“No… it’s just that around the corpse, there’s no garbage, just a lot of food… I was thinking.” I say, trying not to look at the dead body. I grab a can rolling around, and a bag with pasta in it. “The expiration date is the year before last.”

“… That’s certainly strange.”

“But… well, I guess the pasta won’t rot. Even in my house there’s dry noodles and canned foods that are past the expiration date.” My mom is also a very frugal person.

“But why is it here right now?”

“Now?”

I turn my head, puzzled, and see Sakurako-san facing the corpse. Her mouth is open, like she’s waiting for Sakurako-san to tell her the answer. However, the corpse doesn’t talk.

“… If she had tried to escape, she could have. Why did this woman die here?”

Sakurako-san stomps on the ground, irritated. There’s a strange sound as a peach can rolls along the floor.

“She was probably the target. Did she fear that if she escaped with her daughter, they’d both be attacked? … But why are there no defence wounds? Why didn’t that woman use her body to resist and protect herself?”

We don't understand why Sakurako-san is making such a fuss over that. Utsumi-san is also troubled. He looks like he's waiting for the first responders before Sakurako-san messes up the scene. As for me, I feel like I'm forgetting something important.

"…Well, where's the baby?"

"What?"

"Little A-chan… In other words, the little baby Ii-chan mentioned. Even at the hospital, they said her mom's stomach was big…"

"You should have mentioned that sooner!" Sakurako-san shouts at me in a harsh tone.

She gives me an amazingly threatening glare. It seems she's gotten her answer from the corpse.

"If we move the corpse like this…" Sakurako-san immediately puts her hands on the corpse, and pushes it on the floor.

"Kujo-san! That's terrible!"

Utsumi-san wants to preserve the scene. However, that isn't enough to stop Sakurako-san. She's only focusing on one thing.

"Storage under the floor…?"

There's a small door under the corpse. The door is stained red with blood. I understand immediately – the corpse was hiding that.

"This is…"

Sakurako-san places her hands on the blood stained handle. We watch her grab the blood soaked thread, and wait for her to open the door. Before long, a sound can be heard as the door opens.

"Sakurako-san!"

My heart skips a beat. There's a small baby laying down in the storage space that seems to be for preserved foods.

Part 6

The baby is a red colour, and doesn't seem to be breathing.

"Anything is fine! Get something to cool its body!" Sakurako-san shouts as she roughly pushes all the garbage off the table with her arm. She lays the baby in the middle of the table, and takes off its clothes.

"I-I saw an electric fan a little while ago!" Utsumi-san runs into the living room.

I turn to the fridge. The inside is almost completely empty, there's only cosmetics in the middle instead of food.

"Oh, darn it, there's nothing here."

I open the freezer, but the ice maker is empty. I look for icenon, but there isn't one of those, either. (TL NOTE: Icenon is like an ice pack)

"It couldn't escape like the other child, but it would be dangerous to hold it. So she hid it here… to protect this child." Sakurako-san says, groaning.

The baby's body seems to be getting hotter. It's probably because it was locked in a narrow place for a long time, especially since it's such a hot day. Honestly I… think it's too late for the baby. However, Sakurako-san examines that body of the baby and says "I can still make

it in time". Until the ambulance comes, we have no choice but to do whatever we can.

"I-is frozen fried rice okay?"

I take the frozen fried rice out of the freezer.

"It doesn't matter. Hand it over!" Sakurako-san says as she takes the fried rice from me. I take off my t-shirt and put it on the bag of rice, then place it on the baby.

"The fan! I found it!" Utsumi-san comes back and sets up the fan.

"Now… wake up."

Sakurako-san begins rhythmically pushing on the baby's chest with two fingers. A cardiac massage. Since it's a small baby, she must be nervous about doing this.

"Are you looking for an automated external defibrillator?!" Utsumi-san asks.

"No, use of an AED on an infant under 1 year old is prohibited by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. You could say it's a pointless law, but I don't know how much damage an AED could do to a little body like this."

"Then, is there anything else I can do?"

"Well, it's cooling down now. Babies can't regulate their body temperature on their own. Go borrow some cold water from a neighbour!"

Sakurako-san gives Utsumi-san instructions, then covers the baby's nose and puts her mouth to its. I think this is called artificial respiration. Breathe into the baby twice, confirm that the lungs have expanded, separate your mouth, and resume the cardiac massage. I think it's a really simple method, even an adult can pinch someone's nose. It makes sense.

"Can you hear me? This child absolutely can't die." While performing the cardiac massage, Sakurako-san talks to the baby. "You need to wake up, it's still too early for you to die."

Before my grandmother passed away, I remember a nurse telling me that you should talk to them. If you talk to them, it can help bring their consciousness back. Listening to Sakurako-san's voice, I pour out all the deodorizing spray that I carry into the sink, and fill it with tap water.

"Should I spray it on the body? Although it's only for peace of mind, the fan might help it evaporate and lower their temperature."

It's really just for peace of mind. Even so, it can still add up to something bigger. Sakurako-san nods, so I spray that baby with cold water. Isn't there anything else I can do? Ahh, geez, how long is this ambulance going to take! Still, thanks to Sakurako-san's treatment, the reddish tinge of the baby's skin colour has faded, and it's now a more normal colour.

"Live, live, living is the mission of young people like you. You absolutely can't die." Sakurako-san keeps repeating that to the baby.

This is the first time I've seen Sakurako-san act so desperate. I always thought she loved dead things. I thought she was a person who loved the silence of the dead. But now, I see her with sweat dripping down the back of her neck as she tries to save this baby's life.

"If you're gone, your big sister will be all alone. So please, for the sake of your sister, open your eyes! Please, please don't leave her alone."

This words make me feel a stabbing pain in my chest. That's right, for Ii-chan's sake, this child can't die.

"I'll go ask if any of the neighbours have any icenon!"

As I finish spraying the baby with water, and start to tell Sakurako-san that I'll be leaving, a scream echoes from the entrance.

"Utsumi-san?!"

That voice was definitely Utsumi-san's. I hurry into the kitchen, and see Utsumi-san holding an icenon in one hand, standing in the entrance.

"Wh…"

"Don't come over here!" Utsumi-san yells.

There's a man standing in front of him. The top half of his body is naked, and he's only wearing cargo shorts on his bottom half, with no shoes. Besides that, there's dark, red blood stuck to his whole body. I'm trembling. He is obviously angry.

"Huh…"

The man is holding a stainless steel kitchen knife. There's blood flowing from Utsumi-san's arm.

"Both of you! Run away!" Utsumi-san yells at me, as he throws various things from the floor at the man.

The man's eyes are bloodshot and unfocused. He mumbles strange things as he stares at us. At first sight, this man seems strange, but also dangerous.

"Sakurako-san! It's the criminal!"

"Escape through the window!" I say, pulling Sakurako-san's hand, but she pulls her hand away from mine with all her strength.

"Don't! Right now, my fingers are this child's heart! If I don't keep applying pressure, no oxygen will go to this child's brain. I absolutely can't take my hands away!"

"Dang it!"

Then what should we do? Should I escape on my own? …No, I can't do that. Should I do it? If I do something like that, I'll regret it until the day I die. I'm not strong enough to endure that, so there's only one thing to do. The only thing I can do is jump into the living room with a bottle of salt and pepper. The man has entered the house, but Utsumi-san is holding his legs to keep him from moving.

"I won't let gooooo!" Utsumi-san shouts bravely.

Even though the man is holding a knife, Utsumi-san is still trying to stop him. He's trying to let us escape. I open the cap on the bottle of salt and pepper in my hand, hold my breath, and swing it with all my strength at the man. The man coughs, instinctively trying to protect his face.

It's like salt and pepper rain. My eyes sting, and my nose burns. I don't miss the gap. In the next moment, the man rolls onto the floor. I don't even know what happened. My eyes sting from the salt and pepper, and the man looks scared. I grabbed the man's arm that was holding the knife, closed my eyes, twisted his arm, and rolled him onto the floor. It seems the man fainted. I didn't expect that move to finish this so easily. It's almost a miracle.

"Ta-Tatewaki-kun?!"

Salt and pepper falls on Utsumi-san, who's at the man's feet. Utsumi-san raises his voice, with red eyes.

"Hurry!"

But I'm in shock, and I'm in pain. For now, I have to subdue the man. Utsumi-san rushes over, and puts handcuffs on the man and takes the knife away from him.

“D-do you… do judo?” Utsumi-san asks while breathing heavily.

“My grandpa is a judo teacher, he runs a class. I wasn’t good at it, though, so the only thing I can do is the self-defence technique I did just now…”

My grandpa used to always say “you don’t have to be strong, you just need the techniques to protect yourself and others.” I didn’t think the technique I learned was really useful, but I guess I should thank my grandpa. I’d like it if I never had to use it again.

“Well, why didn’t you tell me that earlier? I got stabbed because of you…”

“Ah…”

While I try to check the condition of Utsumi-san’s injury, I hear sirens in the distance.

“Reinforcements…”

At almost the same time, a small cough and weak crying from a baby comes to our ears. Suddenly… its body relaxes. For the first time in my life, I truly thank God from the bottom of my heart.

Final part

Thanks to Sakurako-san’s wisdom and treatment, the baby escaped death. If she had discovered the baby or started treatment a few minutes later, I don’t know what would have happened to the baby. Once again, I think Sakurako-san is amazing. Utsumi-san and I couldn’t even find the baby, let alone help it.

That day, it really was Ii-chan’s mom that died in the kitchen. The man who killed her was in a relationship with her, and was the baby’s father. It seems he got drunk after a dispute at work, and stabbed the mother. The result of the inspection concludes that the man was on psychoactive drugs.

Ii-chan’s mom had 10 stab wounds on her back. She was stabbed in the back over and over, yet she still protected her children. But even so, the public response is sadly cruel. Until they find a new topic, this murder case is shown on TV every day in Asahikawa. One by one, the thoughtless remarks on Twitter start to roll in. Ii-chan’s mom should be the victim, but the world is accusing her. In the media’s report, she wasn’t a mother who risked her own life to protect her children, she was a perpetrator who neglected and endangered her children. It hurts my heart severely. I’m always sad about the corpses that Sakurako-san and I find.

Sakurako-san and I are given a thank you letter from the police. I’ve heard that they sometimes give gifts of thanks, but I didn’t know what to expect. It’s not much, just a framed letter.

“Treasure it. When you do something wrong, this thank you letter could get you a reduction on your penalty.”

Utsumi-san smiles and teaches me that if I do end up doing something bad once I get a driver’s license, like get a speeding or parking ticket, I can get my penalty reduced with it. Although, I don’t know the future. I pray that I won’t have to use it at the shrine in my house.

Ii-chan’s little brother is going to be taken care of by a distant family member. I only met them once, when I was visiting Utsumi-san at the police box. They seem like good people. I also hear that Ii-chan is doing well. I pray that she’s happy.

Utsumi-san’s wounds were sewn up, and the next time I saw him, he was just as

optimistic, cheerful, and friendly as always. I'll end up meeting him again, but that's a different story.

Every time this hot season comes again, I remember this day, and feel burning regret. This doesn't change, year after year. I know that the world has happy endings, and endings that aren't as sweet. But if I could, I would have liked to have gotten there sooner. Then, I would have liked to save her. That sad, single mother, who died while unable to express her unwavering love.

Third bone: One Who Can Be Killed

Part 1

Asahikawa's three most prominent soul foods are roasted bananas, jun dogs, and hotdogs. If one is missing, I can't live. However, travel magazines and gourmet food magazines usually pick up "Asahikawa ramen", "roasted shinko", and "salted offal." Asahikawa has a long history with raising livestock, especially pig farming. So, Asahikawa ramen usually has pig based soup, and salted offal also usually uses them… I think.

Therefore, Asahikawa citizens love yakiniku. Cooking meat and vegetables over charcoal and eating it ina garden or by the river on a holiday. Of course, nobody likes to say barbecue, so everyone says "yakiniku" or "outdoor cooking." Asahikawa citizens talk about going out on a sunny holiday during the warm season, during that peaceful time from afternoon to evening, and cooking yakiniku. It's impossible to not smell cooking meat in the neighbourhood, or your own garden in Asahikawa. Naturally, the supermarket's leading products are charcoal nets for yakiniku, big bags of seasoning, noodles, sheep, beef, pork, and seafood. Meat shops and general stores sell raw meat for yakiniku at a lower price, so that's what I usually eat. Enjoying delicious yakiniku on a holiday is the best way to connect with other Asahikawa citizens.

So, shortly after summer break started, I went to Shouko-san's house to have some extraordinarily delicious yakiniku in her garden. The meat in Arashiyama is produced in Asahikawa, such as herb pig, Iberian pig, a rare breed of short corn cattle, and even Suffolk sheep. I guess rich people eat their yakiniku outside, or rather, I'm surprised they eat yakiniku at all.

There's also all kinds of summer vegetables in the garden. They're cooked with grated garlic, salt, several spices, painted with special oil, and cooked. Of course, the delicious meat still tastes the best. My favourites are green peppers, and the dark horse, zucchini. The moment you put it in your mouth, the juice and scent spread all through your mouth, like it's melting. That taste is to die for… but it's already fading.

"That was delicious."

"Is was pretty good. I was worried there would be extra, since Nao-chan said he can't come."

Shouko-san says delightfully, while transferring the extra charcoal to a container with a stomach full of delicious food. To be honest, I ate a bit too much. Not only because it was so delicious that I feel like it would be a waste to leave some, since I also almost never eat meat when I'm with Sakurako-san. Gran always complains that Sakurako-san has had an unbalanced diet since childhood, since she only wanted to eat sweets, and especially didn't want any meat. With such delicious meat, how could she not want to eat it?! That kind of anger pushed me into overeating. I feel like if I move, everything that I just ate will come back up.

"It's too bad about Ariwara-san's work."

I say quietly, so that my food really doesn't come back up. Shouko-san says "that's right," while nodding. My delicate, golden spoon against the glass bowl makes a clear sound. In the bowl was homemade strawberry sorbet, but now it's only red streaks at the bottom.

“Really, it’s only work, but it’s still a problem. With a fiancée like Saa-chan, it’s a matter of being refused.”

“Is that so?”

Is Ariwara-san even human to be able to put up with Sakurako-san? Shouko-san smiles bitterly. Sakurako-san sits across from me, eating 3 bowls of sorbet like it doesn’t concern her.

“Even if he’s busy with work, and they rarely meet, I don’t think the lady has any complaints. Even she doesn’t follow through with their plans or doesn’t contact him, he doesn’t mind, and just believes in her and waits. Nao-chan is a blessing.” Shouko-san sighs.

Even if her arranged meetings don’t go as planned, I’m sure Sakurako-san wouldn’t be upset about it.

“It can’t be helped.” It’s over with that one sentence. They don’t email or phone each other on a daily basis.

“Isn’t it lonely to never see each other?”

The truth is, I’ve been a bit curious about it.

“Not particularly. It’s fine as long as we’re both in good health.

Sure enough, Sakurako-san gives me a short, indifferent reply. Right now, her mind is filled with only strawberry sorbet. Ariwara-san may seem to be “fine” with not seeing her, since he’s busy with work, but maybe he is a bit lonely?

“But… Isn’t it better to occasionally contact each other?”

Shouko-san gives me a bitter smile, but I’m just speaking my mind. Her eyes tell me that she has the same opinion as me, but it makes me a bit uncomfortable. Beyond that, she definitely wouldn’t say anything about it.

“But this is definitely a problem. Next week, I’m going to celebrate by grandfather’s birthday, but Nao-chan is overseas. I don’t know when he’ll be back… Geez!” Shouko-san says in a slightly higher voice than normal, then hits her elbow against the sofa. The atmosphere becomes a bit cloudier. “Geez… What is it?”

“No, I don’t feel like going. I would pretend to be sick, but of course, that wouldn’t be a good reason.”

Upset and troubled, Shouko-san furrows her eyebrows. I know that on my grandfather’s birthday, he always gives presents to others, as well as accepting them for himself.

“Is it a special celebration?”

“Yes, since it’s his 90th birthday, we’re having a party with all of his relatives…”

“Really?”

Shouko-san lets out a deep sigh. She doesn’t seem to be happy about her grandfather’s birthday. Still, thinking about it, she’s gone through a lot recently. There was the unfortunate incident with her husband dying in an accident, but it’s not just a problem with her. It’s normal to feel awkward when you’re meeting relatives. Still, it’s a birthday party to celebrate someone turning 90 years old. If she doesn’t attend, her relationships with them will only get worse.

“Plans can change suddenly, so Ariwara-san might be able to make it.”

“I hope so, but…”

Shouko-san lowers her head. Even though I said it myself, I don’t think it’s likely. The atmosphere becomes cloudy, like someone scraped the grill with the charcoal scraper. The sunlight is intense, and the heat slowly burns my cheeks.

"…Hey, Saa-chan." After a while, Shouko-san shifts herself on the bench and begins to speak.

"I refuse." Sakurako-san answers before Shouko-san can finish speaking. She speaks bluntly.

"Geez! I haven't even said it yet."

"Why don't you just say that you don't want to go alone?"

"If you understand that, then come with me."

"I refuse."

"Saa-chan!"

Sakurako-san eats her sherbet, looking down at her glass bowl, while Shouko-san desperately tries to persuade her. However, Sakurako-san only stares at her.

"First of all, don't you think you're asking the wrong person?"

"Oh, but isn't it a good enough reason for you to represent Naoe? Also, your grandfather was good to my grandfather, so I'm sure he would be pleased. So, go with me."

"I already said that I refuse."

I understand Shouko-san's feelings about going alone, but Sakurako-san hates troublesome things like taking to and meeting people when she doesn't have to. I understand both of their feelings, so while I watch them argue, I suddenly come up with an idea.

"Umm… But if you take Sakurako-san with you, won't she be trouble again…?"

Just like a curse that a pharaoh places on tomb raiders, Sakurako-san brings conflict and unease wherever she goes. Even though she doesn't mean to, her knowledge ends up dragging other people into things.

"…"

Shouko-san doesn't answer my question. She only glances back and forth between Sakurako-san and me.

"That's right…" Then, a short silence. "…Then Shou-chan, you're welcome to join us."

"What?"

"I mean, I'm sure you're uneasy about Saa-chan."

"What?"

"If Shou-chan comes with us, then won't you come, too, Saa-chan?" Shouko-san says with a smile, looking at me. Sakurako-san gets up, firmly hitting her shoulder against mine.

"No matter who goes, I still won't go."

"Why?! I think you're wrong for dragging me into this?! Ariwara-san is Sakurako-san's fiancé, so I understand that, but I'm completely unrelated!"

I never thought I would be dragged into this, so I start panicking.

"It's fine. Tell people you're my lover."

"L-lover?!" What's she talking about?! "Lover… no, it's nothing like that."

"...You don't have to make such a disgusted expression."

My eyes dart around. Shouko-san pouts, and sticks out her lips. I guess I was a bit rude.

"No, it's like that I hate it, it's just that we shouldn't, and-"

Well, Shouko-san is much older than Sakurako-san, perhaps even old enough to be her mother. She'd be a young, lovely mother who loves everyone unconditionally. Even though she's in trouble, and it isn't difficult, I still don't want to pretend to be her lover…

"Still, isn't the age gap too wide?"

I'm still a minor, and a high school student.

"Shou-chan, you're so calm that everyone will think you're 20 years old, even though you has a child's face."

It doesn't feel bad to be called calm, especially because I sometimes get scolded for not being as calm as my older brother. Still, I have to refuse.

"Anyway, I won't!"

"I see…"

I feel bad for Shouko-san, but I can't say yes. When I decline with a stern voice, Shouko-san's face becomes cloudy, like roses scattering. She wrinkles her eyebrows, and her eyes turn wet.

"I didn't come from a good home. Still, until now, I was fine as long as I was with Akihito-san, but I'm uncomfortable going alone this time…"

So that's it… Shouko-san covers her face with her hands and mutters to herself. I look to Sakurako-san for help but she gets off e bench, and turns back to Shouko-san and I, and looks to the Mongolian oak tree.

"Sakurako-san…"

"There's a Japanese giant silkworm cocoon. It has a trademark web, so you can recognize it immediately. Moths emerge periodically in large groups. Now, it seems there will be a large amount of moths in Monbetsu, but Asahikawa may soon have more moths around the city."

"No, I wasn't talking about moths…"

"Even though we call them moths and butterflies, they're the same thing taxonomically. In France and Germany, moths and butterflies are both called the same thing, which are schmetterling and papillon. In the Japanese language, Hesse-"

I wasn't expecting it, but she doesn't seem to be on my side. Ignoring the sad Shouko, Sakurako-san begins to speak enthusiastically about the moth. Though, she may be too enthusiastic.

"…Well, I would be fine going with Sakurako-san."

Sakurako-san's attitude gradually makes me angrier, but I finally lose my patience. I said it for Shouko-san's sake, but I also feel a bit mean to do that to Sakurako-san.

"I told you that I refuse."

"It's fine! Gran would agree with me, and she would an make preparations for you."

"Excuse me?!"

"Shouko-san is in trouble, so there's no helping it. Even though you won't agree to go, what do you think gran would say?"

"You… Are you threatening me?!"

"Not really, I was just saying what I think."

Sakurako-san's face quickly turns red. She can't argue against gran. With gran put into the mix, getting in trouble with Shouko-san means getting in trouble with gran. No matter how

much Sakurako-san protests, gran will get her out of the house without mercy. I grin. I finally outsmarted her.

“Really?! That’s great! Both of you can come!” Shouko-san suddenly looks up, smiling wide. “That’s right, I’m sure Sakurako-san would be uneasy with only one person she knows there, so bringing Shou-chan would surely calm her down. My grandmother loves having guests over, so I’m sure she would welcome both of you!” Shouko-san says happily, even though she was just hiding her face with her hands.

Sakurako-san is ignoring us, with her head against the Mongolian oak tree, while mumbling something. Maybe she’s cursing me. Yay, I finally won! I’m in a good mood. Until returning to the car, I don’t notice the trouble.

Part 2

One week later, we get into Sakurako-san’s car at Shouko-san’s house, and head to Sapporo. Since I’m going to be staying overnight in Sapporo, I was worried about how to explain it to my mother, but Shouko-san talked to her. Since Shouko-san is polite, it seems the two of them got along quickly. Maybe it’s because they have both lost someone precious to them, they resonate with each other.

Right after the Sapporo junction, the car heads straight towards the city, along a big, riverside road. Even I know it’s the Toyohira river. Asahikawa is full of rivers, so I feel strangely at peace being near one. After travelling along the Toyohira river for a while, the car heads into the heart of the city. The TV tower we’re using as a landmark is sitting between tall buildings. It’s about 30 minutes past noon, now. A red, steel tower sticks straight up into the clear, blue sky.

Sapporo is about a 2 hour drive from Asahikawa, or half an hour by train. It’s the first Hokkaido city people know about. Even so, Asahikawa boasts about having the third highest population north of Tokyo, even though it might not seem like much compared to Sapporo. There’s lots of stores in Sapporo, and even though Asahikawa has about as many, they’re not as big.

I feel like the scenery in the city doesn’t change much. Unlike Asahikawa, the Sapporo doesn’t have a countryside landscape in the suburbs. No matter how far you go, the houses are packed together, there are supermarkets and convenience stores, and the restaurants are always crowded. It really makes you feel the population of 1 900 000. Even as the car heads into the mountains, it’s still “Sapporo” everywhere. Since it’s a city, the houses in Sapporo are small. The gardens are small, and the parking spots are narrow. According to the district, the land sizes are usually about 80 tsubo, but I’d like to have at least 100 tsubo… It really is different from Asahikawa. The houses are crammed into such narrow spaces that it feels suffocating. I guess there’s upsides and downsides to any city.

While I think, the car passes by red and yellow flowers, Oodoori Park, and heads into the mountains. Along the way, we visit Shouko-san’s old favourite high class restaurant (a sushi shop). After lunch, we head into the Miya no Mori district.

My earlier idea that “Sapporo houses are small” quickly changes. We enter a high class residential area on top of a hill. There are so many houses in a row that are bigger than both

Shouko-san and Sakurako-san's houses. The rich people of Sapporo really do give off a wealthy aura.

Soon, our car pulls up to a particularly large house. Among the western style houses, the Japanese architecture of this house looks beautiful. This house is amazing, but seeing it before my eyes makes me nervous.

When the car stops, a small, old man hurries over to us. Since he's wearing a refined, black suit, I thought he was Shouko-san's grandfather, but apparently his name is Kanazawa-san. He explains to us that he used to work for Shouko-san's parents.

"You all must be tired. Come inside, I'll get something cold for you ladies."

Kanazawa-san helps us unload our luggage, and carry it to the mansion. Sakurako-san has already headed to the entrance. Since we came to the party full dressed up and prepared, it looks like there's too much luggage for 3 people staying for 1 night. At first glance, Kanazawa-san looks elderly, so it feels cruel to make him help carry our luggage. Because of my personality, I choose to help him.

"It's fine. It's light."

That's a lie, but since Shouko-san is using the cart (I wonder where she got it) I'm forced to carry it. Kanazawa-san makes a troubled face for a moment, but I smile at him, since it can't be helped… He soon smiles, too. Even if it doesn't work on Sakurako-san, there's magic behind a smile.

"Thank you for carrying it to the entrance. Someone else will carry it later."

"Yes," I reply, smiling.

While two people carry our luggage, Kanazawa-san says things like, "sorry I made you help. You really saved me," and, "please watch your step." He always speaks politely. I think I like this person. Though, if other people are going to come carry our luggage later like Kanazawa-san says, I would have rather had them meet us at the car… I guess this is just Kanazawa-san's way of welcoming guests. Even though we're late, we make it to the parlour where everyone else is.

Not only in the entrance, but also in the hallways, there's pottery decorated with flowers all over the place. I expected a lot, but… It's still surprising. If you ask me if it's to my liking, I'd say it isn't. I still think Shouko-san's house is better. Among the paintings is one picture of a cat, drawn in messy scribbles. When I notice it, I stop walking. Is it something the owner of the house drew as a child? As soon as I think that, Kanazawa-san smiles at me.

"Do you know what that is? Of course. It was a gift from Fujita himself. When the master was young, he went to France several times and became friends with him."

"Wow…"

When I respond in an amazed voice, Kanazawa-san looks delighted and proud. He looks like gran when Sakurako-san praises her. He must be really close with the master – Shouko-san's grandfather. To be honest, I don't actually know who Fujita is. Still, I can't say it with this kind of atmosphere, so I stay silent.

When we get to the parlour, I sit down on the sofa with a beautiful, blue glass. Shouko-san and Sakurako-san drink, and there's a woman wearing cool, gauze clothing, with beautiful white hair. I know right away that she's Shouko-san's grandmother. They somehow resemble each other. Still, the point on her chin, and the corners of her eyes look more like

Ariwara-san and Shouko-san.

"Hello…" I realize that I'm staring, so I bow my head at the same time I speak.

"Please, come over here. Would you like a drink? You're just a boy, so juice would probably be better."

Shouko-san's grandmother stands up and touches as she speaks. The gentle atmosphere, and the aroma of the scent bag cause memories of my late grandmother to run through my head. My beloved grandmother also wore kimono.

"Are you Soutarou-kun? Really, you two have gotten so big."

Her grandmother says as looks at Sakurako-san and I with nostalgia in her eyes. She looks so happy, and full of love. It makes my chest feel warm. For a moment, I feel like the spirit of my grandmother has gone into to Shouko-san's grandmother.

"Ah… Umm…"

This isn't right. I haven't met this person, right…?

"Grandmother, umm…" Shouko-san hurriedly pulls on her grandmother's kimono sleeve. However, her grandmother doesn't seem to have noticed it.

"Oh my. When you were little, didn't you go see the snow festival with Naoe? You might have been too small to remember, Soutarou-kun, but that time-" Her grandmother says, smiling.

"Grandmother!"

I don't understand what her grandmother is talking about, but Shouko-san raises her voice. Noticing her frustration, her grandmother's face freezes.

"… Oh well, it's alright. Sorry, I…"

The room is filled with a strange atmosphere. Her grandmother looks at Sakurako-san and I again. Sakurako-san is facing away from me, so I don't know what kind of expression I should have right now. I probably look pretty confused. Her grandmother looks at me with a strange expression. Do I look like this child? I look at Shouko-san. Apparently she was mistaken. Moreover, it seems they have a similar name to mine. I get a strange feeling.

"Grandmother, I will introduce you. This child is Tatewaki-kun. He's my lover."

Shouko-san pulls herself together, and pulls my arm over and pushes her body against it.

"…Lover?"

As I expected, her grandmother looks suspicious for a moment.

"Yes, isn't he cute?"

"I see…"

I smile and cling back, making Shouko-san look dignified. The woman slowly blinks once. Once her eyes open, she makes a fake, cold smile. She definitely doesn't welcome me. But I guess that's natural for a woman who thought I was her grandson.

"I'm her grandmother, Kimiko. Thank you for looking after my granddaughter, Shouko."

"No, if anything, I should thank you…"

Even if she doesn't think highly of me, she's still an elegant, elderly woman. Ms. Kimiko bows respectfully to me. She has a nostalgic, pleasant smell.

"You must be tired, coming all the way here from Asahikawa. I will prepare a room for you, so please have a good night's sleep."

At first glance, her words seem nice, but I know that she actually doesn't want to talk to

me. The air in the room becomes tense as Ms. Kimiko speaks. There's no reason to say no to me. Even though the problem with Shouko-san might be revealed, she says, "we will," with a nod.

We head to the guest room, being guided by Ms. Kimiko. The room is far from the reception area, and along the opposite hallway from the parlour, with Sakurako-san's room across from us. Shouko-san and I are supposed to sleep in the room near the garden.

"I planned to prepare separate rooms, but Nanao came earlier than expected. Instead, I prepared the room with the best view of the garden."

With that said, we are let into the room. To my surprise, there's 2 adjoining rooms. One with a sofa, and one with a bedroom. There's also a shower and washroom connected to the room. It's like a hotel suite. I'm surprised when I look to the side, and see her grandmother open the curtains, revealing the garden. It's more than a garden… I understand that. I always thought that Japanese gardens only had stones and pine trees, but from this room I can see flowers in vivid white, blue, and purple.

"Thank you, grandmother."

Even though Shouko-san likes gardening, it seems like she isn't happy about this. Shouko-san has a tense expression, but she looks at Ms. Kimiko with her usual innocent smile. She looks delighted, she's a good grandmother.

"Well, if you want to change rooms, say something soon. It can't be used right now, but if necessary, I can prepare a room in the todo hotel."

"It's fine, grandmother."

This woman is really sweet. The way Ms. Kimiko speaks to me feels surprisingly overprotective. Shouko-san smiles and declines. This room is so beautiful that it feels too luxurious for me, but I don't want to get a fancy hotel room.

"But… You don't have to endure it."

"Yes, I understand."

"Really?"

Just to be sure, Ms. Kimiko repeats herself, but Shouko-san nods. Ms. Kimiko hesitates for a moment, then gently places the back of her hand on Shouko-san's cheek. She tends to be reserved, but with this loving gesture, I can tell that Ms. Kimiko really worries about Shouko-san. After losing Akihito-san, it may have caused a rift with her relatives.

"I… I!" Unable to stand the atmosphere, I raise my voice. "I will protect Shouko-san!"

"…"

It's silent for a moment. Shouko-san and her grandmother give me a puzzled look.

"Ah…"

After saying such an embarrassing thing, I turn red. However, just as I'm getting a bad feeling, Shouko-san and Ms. Kimiko start to laugh at the same time. Fortunately, it's a good sound.

"No, but, umm… Your grandmother doesn't have to worry, and, say…"

While blushing, I try to say something. Ms. Kimiko says, "I understand," through her laughter. Shouko-san is blushing, and desperately trying to stifle her laugh. I want to run away from here right now. With a less expressive look than before, Ms. Kimiko says "Well then, good night" and leaves the room. A minute after Ms. Kimiko closes the door, Shouko-san starts rolling

around laughing loudly.

"... You don't need to laugh so much."

"Sorry, but, you're so cute, Shou-chan."

"It was impossible to pretend to be your lover, anyway..."

The luggage I struggled to carry to the entrance has already been neatly carried to my room. I'm a bit upset that I didn't use a sports bag instead of a suitcase.

"It's nothing, it's fine."

"Is that so? Your grandmother seemed worried, but she doesn't want to show it."

"No, she's fine - especially here."

"Here?"

I take the new mystery novel out of my bag that I bought before leaving Asahikawa.

"Yes. She doesn't talk about things that bother her in the house. Although it may be easier to just say it's impossible… Anyway, you just need to stay quiet and smile next to me."

"But why did I come, then…"

"Since you're not very good at speaking, you shouldn't say unnecessary things when I'm around. Your existence itself is enough to deter them."

I wonder when she got here? I notice Sakurako-san standing in the entrance to the room, she says,

"Ah, I see…"

I definitely wouldn't want to be seen by a stranger like this. Shouko-san's grandmother already seems suspicious of us, so I wonder if we really need to put on this act.

"Relatives can be difficult, can't they?"

Every family has relatives that cause problems. I smile bitterly, while Sakurako-san raises an eyebrow. It confirms what I thought, but I don't want to be caught. There's a strange atmosphere after earlier. Honestly, I want to ask who "Soutarou-kun" is. However, the time has passed, so I read a book, feeling dissatisfied.

Part 3

"Well, everyone, please pray for the president's health!"

Everyone raises their glasses high for a toast. The sound of glasses tapping and the sound of the bubbles spread like a wave, making me a little bit dizzy. At first, I thought it would be a formal dress party with just family, but I'm honestly surprised at the scale of this party. Taking place in a western style hall next to the main building, Shouko-san's grandmother's birthday party is gorgeous, like a celebrity's party. I'm completely shocked.

Since I'm a student, my formal wear looks like a school uniform. I don't own any formal clothes. Since I was in trouble, Sakurako-san asked Ariwara-san if I could borrow a suit. Ariwara-san is taller than me, but our shoulder seem to be about the same width. He said it would be okay to tuck in the cuffs so they fit tightly. The suit isn't a regular suit, but a proper formal suit for men. We also didn't have to change the length of the pants much. Apparently this was tailored for Ariwara-san when he was around my age. It's a bit old, but the fabric is good, so Shouko-san said it would be fine. Wearing it, I somehow feel like a different person. Even so,

I'm still me, even with different clothes on.

I suddenly feel like I was blown into a different world, but I was the only one who was surprised. There's a gorgeous chandelier, you can see a beautiful garden through the window… but that's not all.

"I didn't want to say it… but where's your family?"

"Oh, this is all family."

"That's right, where's your own family?"

"No. This group is Seijirou Toudou, the guest of honour's, children and this partners, and grandchildren."

"…What?"

I blink with confusion while I drink my orange juice. Even if it's just children and grandchildren, that's still a lot of people. Especially since nearly 100 people are gathered in this hall.

"Mr. Toudou is well known for having lots of children. They say he's had about 10 with his wife, Ms. Kimiko, and around 10 with others outside the marriage. Apparently if a DNA test was done, there would be even more children."

"W… Well, doesn't that mean that he alone has at least 20 children?"

Sakurako-san nods.

"That's… Even if they're all family, that's a lot of people…"

Shouko-san gets pulled into greeting other people soon, leaving Sakurako-san and I out. Sakurako-san is wearing a dress that Shouko-san bought while overseas. She protested, but she looks really, really beautiful. Sakurako-san is wearing a white dress, with a tuxedo dress-like design. The top half is like a sleeveless shirt, with the bottom being a tight, knee-length skirt. It's very simple, but the simplicity is rather refreshing. It emphasizes her long limbs, and the smooth curve of her body, but it doesn't feel obscene at all. It gets tighter around the butt, and emphasizes her thighs. The tight dress line and high heels draw a splendid S shape. I'm a bit proud to be with Sakurako-san at a party like this. However, at the same time, I feel a little disappointed.

"Oh, Kujo-san is over there!" Suddenly, a voice comes from behind us.

When I turn around, I see a woman who's about 40 years old. She's wearing the same white dress as Sakurako-san, but her's somehow looks glossier. She seems to be Sakurako-san's acquaintance, so I bow lightly.

"I'm Yachiyo. I'm Shouko's aunt. I'm that old man's youngest daughter – of course, from his legal wife. Well, even if I say I'm her aunt, Shouko-san and I are almost the same age."

Yachiyo shakes Sakurako-san's hand with the hand that doesn't have a champagne glass, and laughs at me. Her makeup is rather obvious… Which is to say it's quite gaudy, and gives her a showy impression.

"Hello…"

"I heard Shouko brought her boyfriend, but… It couldn't be you, right?"

"Is there a problem with that?"

Being shut down from the beginning makes me a bit annoyed.

"There is. She's 20 years older than you, old enough to be your mother. You're a minor, right?"

“You’re wrong. I just have a baby face.”

“I can see that. You don’t have the skin of a young child, but you give off the feeling of a boy.”

I’m also drinking juice… As she continues, I start to get annoyed, so I reach for Sakurako-san’s sparkling wine, but she doesn’t let me have it.

“You can’t. Underage drinking not only promotes atrophy of the brain, but also hinders bone growth, and effects the production of hormones. I don’t know how great the effects of a single drink are. However, don’t even try once. As someone older than you, it’s my obligation to guide you on the path to a healthy life.” Sakurako-san says as she slaps my hand lightly.

Apparently Sakurako-san is scolding me. I always felt like I was her guardian, so I’m surprised that she feels responsible for me. She doesn’t seem happy about my lie. I’m having trouble talking about it, now. I’m trying to pass myself off as 20 years old today.

“Umm…”

I don’t know how to escape anymore. I look at Sakurako-san for help, but she looks angry. I have no choice but to smile at Yachiyo-san. I think she can tell that my smile is a lie. Surprisingly, Yachiyo-san doesn’t seem to blame me, and she smiles back at me.

“It’s okay, I understand. She didn’t want to come alone, so my younger sister forced you into coming, right?” Yachiyo-san says, raising her eyebrows like she knows everything. “Well, out of all the children, Shouko is the most honest. Honestly, she could have said something. Oh, you didn’t do a bad job, your compliments just felt forced. You’re quite prepared.” Yachiyo-san looks around the hall. “…That girl is in a difficult position.”

“Difficult position?”

“Right.” She gives a short nod.

It seems Yachiyo-san is a bit of an impatient person. Although she doesn’t sound rude, she talks fast, and moves quickly. It feels like… she’s too eager to talk.

“Well, most of the people here today have special circumstances.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. Nobody is here just to have company. Everyone here is really thinking ‘That old man should hurry up and drop dead.’”

“Huh?”

I accidentally spill my juice. She said such a terrible thing, but Sakurako-san doesn’t seem to care. She isn’t denying it. Yachiyo-san turns around, and stares at one spot with a serious expression. She looks at none other than today’s main event, Mr. Toudou. He is wearing a light brown suit with flowers on it, and holding a cane. He is with Ms. Kimiko and another woman, who is a bit younger, and holding his arm close. His legs don’t seem weak, so he doesn’t seem to be 90 years old, especially with his crisp appearance.

“When he was hospitalized for a sudden heart problem, everyone was overjoyed that the rotten old man was finally gone. He’s truly hated by his children.”

“…Then why does he seem happy?”

“You think he’s happy? I hear that old man is jumping from one woman to the next. He’s having children one after another. How much money does he have to keep doing that?” Yachiyo-san spits while she says that.

Jumping from one woman to the next… that means “that thing,” doesn’t it? I’m certainly

glad my father doesn't do things like that. In reality, I'd hate to have that many younger siblings. Still, how much he earns… the way she said that made her seem like she has unpleasant feelings about it. I wonder if he really doesn't have a problem with money.

"Everyone, I'm sorry, but you won't be getting any more siblings, uncles, or aunts, since I'm retiring from work. The company has certainly grown large, but there is a limit. I've been working like a slave for all of you."

Yachiyo-san is clearly angry, and loudly clicks her tongue when she sees him. I wonder if the other families have to work. I saw on a variety show that after a famous sports player got divorced, the cost of child support went up for the paying side. For such a wealthy person, who lives in this huge mansion, the cost of child support can't be that ridiculous. Still, since there's over 10 of them, I think Yachiyo-san's anger is more reasonable.

Mr. Seijiro's laughs loudly as he says, "I've been quite active in my lifetime."

Yachiyo-san doesn't seem to care about who can hear, since she clicks her tongue loudly again.

"Saying things like that, nobody thinks he'll be quiet until he's turned to bone. He just does whatever he wants. At this rate, he'll live to be 100, not just 90." Yachiyo-san lets out a huge sigh. "But my mother is still herself. She was astonished by 'Turandot'."

"Turandot?"

"Pucchini's opera." Sakurako-san begins yawning, as if she's completely tired of Yachiyo-san's talking. "It's a story of a peerless beautiful woman with a heart as cold as ice, who stubbornly refused courtships. In the olden days, mothers would arrange marriages, which caused a lot of hardships, for the sake of their father's pride."

I see, it's true that Shouko-san's grandmother – Ms. Kimiko, isn't hard to imagine as a beautiful person in her youth. She looks kind, so saying she's cold hearted doesn't seem accurate to me.

"She has had to take care of the old man, look after his lovers and children, and manage his health care. She says it's an honour, but to me, it looks more like slavery."

"Slavery…?"

"After the old man collapsed due to heart failure, she studies nutrition, and decided his meals every day, saying it's a medical diet. It's so he lives a long life." Yachiyo-san continues to spill too much information in an annoyed tone. "Well, she acts like a perfect wife, and takes pride in being a mother. How silly. There's also Shintarou."

"Shintarou?"

"Yes, the one who gave the last speech at the toast earlier."

"Ah…"

Several people gave celebratory speeches during the toast, but it was mostly dull flattery, and tedious. The last man to speak, however, was very persuasive, so I listened. I remember his way of speaking. He's probably a little older than Shouko-san and Yachiyo-san. He's wearing a snappy suit, but he doesn't look gaudy at all, even with his hair tied back.

"I'm told he's the heir of this family. He had a legitimate birth, so his father is Toudou. He says it's a man's obligation to take over the power."

"That's amazing."

"… Is that so? I say he's just my father's yes-man. I was stupid for coming to this

party…”

Does Yachiyo-san not like Shintarou-san? She mutters bitterly, then suddenly looks around the hall.

“But still, isn’t it a good opportunity for relatives to get together? Regardless of your grandfather, you should still talk to your siblings, or see how your family members are doing, or something.”

“Family members… I wonder if personalities are hereditary.”

“Huh?”

Yachiyo-san mutters to herself. Sakurako-san stares at the bubbles in her sparkling wine, and snorts at us.

“The answer could be either yes or a no.”

“What do you mean?” Yachiyo-san asks.

“For example, serotonin secretions are related to the ability to feel anxiety, which is genetically determined. That causes a trend. There’s more than one way to express ‘personality.’ Rather, it’s the environment and experiences that make a person who they are.”

There certainly are some similarities between the personalities of parent and child. I think living together, genetics, and life experiences together determine who someone is. My grandparents raised me with love, but they’re also kind of old fashioned.

“Really… The environment. I guess that means my family will never have good luck with marriage.”

After listening to Sakurako-san’s speech, Yachiyo-san drops her shoulders in disappointment.

“It’s definitely my father’s fault. My oldest sister, Kazumi-san, is divorcing, and my other siblings have separate circumstances. Shintarou is turning 50 this year, but he’s still alone, and likes his work more than women. I’m sure there isn’t even one happy family out of all my relatives.”

“Yachiyo-san, are you married?”

I only asked because she seemed angry. Yachiyo-san cackles, like what I just said was a funny joke.

“Why was I born into this family? Is it normal to think that you’ll never get married?”

After saying that, Yachiyo-san looks somewhere else, takes a sip of sparkling wine from her glass, and takes a deep breath.

Following her line of sight, I see Shouko-san talking to several people. Even though she’s smiling, she looks like she’s thinking about something else.

“Oh…”

I want to go over there, but Sakurako-san blocks me with her shoulder. However, I notice that Yachiyo-san is already skillfully slipping through the crowd of people to get to Shouko-san.

“She’s a bit talkative, but she’s not a bad person.” Sakurako-san says in a low voice. It’s probably fine, so I smile.

“You don’t have to worry about her. Come on, this is a rare chance. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

I smile a bit wider, while Sakurako-san looks at the food. Of course there’s no reason for me to say no. As Sakurako-san said, it seems like rich people's parties let you get served at

your seat, so you don't have to get food yourself. Not that I'm thinking about it, people have only been eating small things, like crackers, from the waiters' trays, without even looking at the buffet.

"The difficulty of eating is important. It's hard to stand with a fork and knife, and it's hard to talk while eating. In places like this, talking is the most important thing."

I guess clever people would eat before going to the party. After seeing all the delicious food set up so beautiful, it makes me angry to think that it'll be thrown away without anyone enjoying it. Is talking really more important than all the hard work other people had to go through to cook and grow all this food? In that case, I hope I'm never rich. Sakurako-san smiles at me, so I guess she has an idea of what I was thinking about.

"Well, basically what you want to say is that we can monopolize the food this evening."

Of course it doesn't apply to all parties, but it seems like focusing on food is considered rude. Still, as Sakurako-san said, I can't blame anyone here.

The food prepared by the Toudou family is delicious. One plate can fit up to 4 items if they're placed together, but it's smart to only put 2. It's better to eat the appetizer, then the main dish, so it's in the order of a full course meal. It's also better not to put hot foods and cold foods on the same plate. Sakurako-san teaches me these manners while she eats cake. Honestly, I didn't think Sakurako-san cared much for manners, but this reminds me again that she's a lady. I've seen a lot of amazing things this evening.

The Toudou family is ignoring the food, as if they can't even see it, except for the Toudou family's eldest daughter, Kazumi-san. She gives a blunt greeting, then leaves. Although it was polite, it gave a cold, rough impression. She seems to be the type that's bad at this. While she speaks, she keeps gentle stroking the handle of her glass nervously, reinforcing her strange impression. Since I eat a lot and didn't have lunch, I cram my stomach full of food while I watch the Toudou family. Especially Mr. Seijirou Toudou, who is so energetic that it's hard to believe he's 90 years old this year. He seems to perfect when he talks that's it's overwhelming and dizzying.

"It feels like we shouldn't have come."

"In hindsight. Ms. Yachiyo doesn't always come. It's fine, since we only came here to eat."

I smile bitterly as I talk. Sakurako-san narrows her eyes while she eats chocolate mousse with gold leaf scattered on it.

"Sapporo specifically?"

"I'll take you to Maruyama zoo on the way home. There's a skeletal specimen of a reticulated python made with the proteolytic enzyme method. The specimen is unbelievably wonderful, and it's not an exaggeration to say it's in the realm of God. I think you should go and see it."

"No, I'm not going to Sapporo just to see skeletal specime-"

While we were talking, Shouko-san seems to have approached us without me noticing. She's wearing a kimono today, so her steps are small. The kimono suits her, though. There's white and pink flowers on a greenish blue fabric, showing how much Shouko-san loves gardening, and a lovely red sash clip.

"I'm sorry."

It seems she has been drinking, since her cheeks and flushed. She lowers her head a little.

“No, I wish we could be of more help…” I say, while subconsciously looking for Yachiyo-san.

She’s talking to Shintarou-san now. I thought they were on bad terms, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. I wonder if she was only insulting him because she was in a bad mood. Yachiyo-san has red cheeks from the alcohol. She’s chit chatting. Shintarou-san is listening to Yachiyo-san talk while drinking a dark brown soda. Kazumi-san gave off a rough impression earlier, but when Yachiyo-san laughs, she laughs, too. She has a gentle expression.

“…Did aunt Yachiyo talk to you a lot?”

Shouko-san seems to have noticed where I’m looking, since she speaks unpleasantly.

“Well… a bit.”

“I’m sorry, she’s not a bad person, but…” She says, evasively. “She’s difficult to deal with.”

“…That’s right.”

I’ve noticed that Shouko-san and Yachiyo-san both speak in a gentle tone, so maybe they’re more similar than I thought. Shouko-san stares at Yachiyo-san for a while, then speaks with a smile.

“But I don’t dislike her.”

“Yeah.”

Maybe that’s how she really feels. She doesn’t hate her, but she’s just a little difficult to deal with. At least, they seem to be friends.

“She used to always make our grandfather cry. She wanted to be a model, or an actress but… now it seems like she runs a shop in Susukino. Since she’s a direct person, it seems she has a lot of trouble.”

“Oh… I see.”

Those words leave me feeling like I’m too presumptuous.

“But I really don’t think she’s a bad person, deep down. When Akihito-san died, she was the first one who came to see me.” Shouko-san nods, takes a sip of her sparkling wine, then softly says, “Even though my aunts and uncles sent a telegram after the funeral, only a few people came in person. Aunt Yachiyo helped me from beginning to end… I was really shaken up, so she really saved me.”

What a truly nice person. I think that and smile.

“But she’s difficult to handle, right?”

“Fufufu” Shouko-san laughs mischievously.

At the same time, Mr. Seijirou’s laughter echoes through the entire hall. Mr. Seijirou is talking to someone while looking at Shouko-san, and probably talking about her. In that moment, a tense air spreads between us. I finally realize that Shouko-san isn’t good at dealing with Mr. Seijirou.

“…90 years old, that’s amazing.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I don’t think being 90 years old is that impressive.”

“I see…”

Looking at Shouko-san, Mr. Seijirou gives me an insincere smile. My mind is elsewhere. Before long, she calls me over to meet Mr. Seijirou. For a moment, her face distorts like she's gonna cry. I was worried when I first saw Yachiyo-san, but I feel relieved when she makes eye contact as if it say "leave it to me."

Yachiyo-san and Ms. Kimiko come to help, and join the conversation. It seems they were worried. Mr. Seijirou is laughs about something again, and Shouko-san smiles in response. It seems like an empty, fake smile, though. It's not just Shouko-san. Yachiyo-san and Ms. Kimiko are the same.

"Hereditary, huh…" I accidentally murmur.

"I don't deny that blood is thicker than water. However, I don't think that means water is inferior. Gran and I have no blood relation. It's about the effort put into it, and time spent talking that decide how long it takes to form bonds – because of its thickness, blood grows stagnant. Water is simple." Sakurako-san says.

"Water is simple…"

My blood suddenly feels stagnant, and I can't handle my food anymore. I suddenly feel like I've been pushed into stagnant blood, and lose my appetite.

Part 4

The party was starting to feel like it would never end, but as soon as Mr. Seijirou got tired and returned to his room, it was like the magic wore off. Since it's a gathering of relatives, there isn't much to talk about after the main guest leaves.

"Everyone is leaving."

"Well, nobody has to stay and talk with the old man gone."

"Aren't you going home, Yachiyo-san?"

Apparently Yachiyo-san is going to be staying the night here. As we walk back to the main building, we see the red lights on the cars leave. Kanazawa-san says goodbye to everyone.

"I don't care what you say to anyone."

Yachiyo-san smiles mischievously. Maybe she's worried about Shouko-san, and that's why she's staying here. Even though she's been told she talks too much, she doesn't mention that. She isn't being condescending or rude. Still, I smile when I notice Yachiyo-san gently moving closer to Shouko-san. Maybe it's because their ages are close, but Yachiyo-san and Shouko-san seem like they have a bond like sisters. Somehow it makes my brother seem nicer.

"Well, father likes everyone else better, so it's better if you say you can't go home… Hey, Shouko?"

Shouko-san returns a bitter smile. Even though she doesn't nod, it still seems like she agrees. The main reason Shouko-san is staying here tonight is because of Seijirou-san's request. Yachiyo-san walks ahead of us, towards a middle aged couple.

"My older sister got married, and her husband started a business within the year, but… I'm told that after her aesthetician salon opened, she didn't get many customers. You probably don't want to talk to them about money."

As if she remembered something else, Yachiyo-san says, “oh.”

“By the way, doesn’t it seem like Kouji is staying, too?”

When Yachiyo-san says that, Shouko-san and Sakurako-san both make a strange face.

“…I’m glad Naoe isn’t here.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Both of them nod to each other, but I’m still only pretending to know who Kouji-san is. Shouko-san notices and smiles at me.

“He’s my cousin, my fourth uncle’s son. He was mean to Na-chan a long time ago. It was terrible.”

It’s rare for Shouko-san to clearly say something like, “it was terrible.” Is he mean to everyone, or is Ariwara-san special? Maybe it’s both.

“But Kouji is number one in the Toudou group, now. He’s in university, and he started an IT company that’s drawing worldwide attention.”

“Is that like voice recognition?”

I feel like I’ve heard about that on online news sites recently.

“Yes, it seems it’s being used in smartphone applications.”

“I’ve used TODO applications before.”

TODO voice mail isn’t just for emails, it can also be used to make twitter and blog posts. In addition to it’s amazing speech recognition, it can also learn words that are frequently used online, making it able to smoothly input internet slang. It also has a popular character named Kotone-chan that reads sentences in a moe voice. If you say, “Kotone-chan ___ please” it can upload a video to a video sharing site.

“Thanks to the stock prices of the Toudou company going up, he has become my father’s favourite. Now I manage a chain of sightseeing hotels. I wish someone had told me it was impossible at first, but I’m getting better.”

“I see…”

“Hey, my older brother, Kouji’s dad, has a weak constitution and isn’t fit for management. He didn’t get along with father before, but it seems like he’s trying to fix that lately.”

Since she spoke that way, it seems Shouko-san’s impression of this “Kouji”-san isn’t very good.

“…Back then, I was just a kid who played computer games.”

“I’m going golfing with Shintarou and three other people tomorrow. I hope the weather is good.”

Yachiyo-san seems to be having fun. Does she really want it to be clear? After seeing a fight over the company in front of my eyes, I feel like rich people have harder lives than I thought. I’m absolutely poor, but I have no plans of being rich.

“Shintarou was a better person 30 years ago. He used to always play baseball, and get his back sunburned. It’s like he’s a different person now…” She spits out those words with a deep, deep sigh, like she was talking to herself for a bit.

Then, I remember Yachiyo-san and Shintarou-san talking at the party. Shintarou-san is older, but she doesn’t talk to him like an older brother, but more like a friend. After all, just because their mothers are different, does that mean they have different opinions? For a moment, a doubt passes my mind, but since I don’t know much, and the family seems

complicated, I don't say anything.

"The ones that live in the main house right now are my mother, Kimiko, and my older sister, Kazumi-san. After she got a divorce and moved back, she started to replace my mother as the head of the household. She's gloomy now, and says that all the men left are like snakes." Yachiyo-san says after we arrive at the main building, then she leaves us.

Her room seems to be at the edge of the garden on the other side.

"Really, I wonder if a dead body will show up."

After her father was stabbed… I'm murmuring when I notice that Yachiyo-san and Sakurako-san have disappeared.

Even if she doesn't like her father, that's too far… Yachiyo-san disappears while murmuring disturbing things. I notice that Sakurako-san isn't here, either. Before I go back to my room, I decide to visit her room, but it's empty.

"Where's Sakurako-san?"

"She went on a walk alone a little while ago."

"I- wait, I'll go look for her."

When you take your eyes off Sakurako-san, nothing good happens. I hurry out of the room in my formal clothes.

"Am I allowed on the second floor where your grandfather's room is?" I ask Shouko-san near the door.

…Sakurako-san shouldn't have gone to the second floor. After all the trouble today, I have to go look for her again. She's like a small child that I can't take my eyes off of. I rush through an unfamiliar hallway. I want to run, but I have to be quiet. Even though I'm angry, it would cause trouble if I accidentally ran into an art piece.

I feel a weight on me as I go down the hallway as fast as I can, until I see the figure of a woman crouching by a wall. Although I'm worried the person is Sakurako-san for a moment, she's much too small and delicate to be Sakurako-san.

"W-what's wrong?!"

"Sorry, I'm just feeling a bit…"

The woman says she's a servant of the Toudou family, which is surprising since she doesn't seem much older than me. She's probably not older than 20 years. She has her black hair tied up, and is wearing a white apron. She has glasses, a sharp chin, and seems very weak. She really seems to be feeling unwell, she's pale.

"You don't look very well, why don't you take a break for a bit?"

"But, the master…"

"Is this medicine?"

I grab the tray that's sitting near her feet. On the tray is a pitcher of water, a medicine bag with calcium, vitamins, and various other bottles of supplements.

"The master fell ill with a bad heart a few years ago, so he has to take supplements to keep in good health."

"Then, umm… If it's not a bother, could I take this instead?"

Even though I don't think I have to, considering her poor condition, I decide to ask. I'm worried about Sakurako-san, but it's impossible to ignore her in this situation.

"No, you don't need to." She clearly reassures me. However, her forehead is covered in

sweat.

"I admire your work ethic. Even so, if you're sick, you shouldn't-"

"Nanako-san." A woman's voice suddenly interrupts what I'm trying to say.

"Madam."

I turn around and see Shouko-san's grandmother, Kimiko-san. I'm relieved to see Sakurako-san beside her. Still, she should be scolded for doing something bothersome again.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, she doesn't seem to be feeling very well, so I'm worried…"

I rush over next to Sakurako-san. The servant, who seems to be named Nanako, looks down with a sad expression, so I quickly explain. Kimiko quietly nods, bends down, and lifts the tray.

"You've done enough for today. I will take the medicine."

"I'm very sorry, madam."

"It's fine. If you can't do it, take a break. Hurry back to your room and get something to eat. If it's worse tomorrow, we'll go to the doctor together."

From Nanako-san's expression, I thought she would be in a lot of trouble, but I'm relieved at Kimiko-san's gentle words. Even if it's not in front of the guests… In this era, it's still possible for servants to be under strict working conditions. Still, I wonder how many times Nanako-san has said, "I'm very sorry," now. She looks like she's going to crying. She looks scared. In contrast, Ms. Kimiko is talking to her in a surprisingly gentle tone. Something about the scene feels out of place, but I can't place my finger on it. Ms. Kimiko and I take the tray, while Nanako-san walks away.

"Shouko-san's grandmother… is a really nice person, isn't she?"

"…"

Sakurako-san looks straight at Ms. Kimiko. Even after Ms. Kimiko walks away, Sakurako-san won't respond to me, even when I speak to her.

"Sakurako-san, is something wrong?"

I try asking her again, but she seems to be thinking about something, still staring in the direction Ms. Kimiko went. Still feeling uncomfortable about Sakurako-san, I notice a faint scent drift by.

"What? Is Ariwara-san here?"

She snorts at my question, and glances at me.

"I understand," she says.

There's nothing but the scent of Ariwara-san's perfume. After the refreshing scent of oranges, I can smell sweet flowers. Since I don't know any other men who wear perfume, and I'm around Ariwara-san, this scent reminds me of him.

"Come a bit closer. Come to the door. It's celebratory alcohol."

"It's alcohol?"

"It's cognac. It's apparently it's from the same year that Toudou was born."

"Really…"

It's only alcohol, but it's quite fancy. It's hard to find alcohol that's been aged for 90 years. It seems Ariwara-san got him a fancy present.

"Has he already gone home?"

“He said he might not be able to make it in time for his flight.”

So I guess he came here in a hurry, or something.

“That’s too bad.”

I wanted to greet him. I get caught up in thinking about things like that, making me forget about the uncomfortable feeling from earlier. If I remembered, would things have turned out differently? …No. It probably wouldn’t change. I’m not a good detective.

Part 5

As one would expect, Shouko-san and I can’t sleep in the same bed, so I switch rooms with Sakurako-san. There is a full moon tonight, so a bright, golden light shines in through the curtains I left open. I like it when I can sleep with the curtains open like this.

“…Don’t go to bed.”

Shouko-san and Sakurako-san are in their room, leaving me with some free time. I carelessly forgot my phone charger, and I already finished reading the novel I brought. I decide to go to bed, but what Yachiyo-san told me earlier, and Shouko-san don’t leave my mind. After falling into a shallow sleep, I have many dreams.

Since I slept with the curtains open, naturally the light of dawn flooded in when the sun started to rise. The wall of the room next to mine blocks some of the light, so it isn’t as harsh. Since the Toudou family’s window isn’t blocked by buildings, I have to get up from my early morning sleep.

“Ah, geez…”

I will never again leave the curtain open while I sleep at a new place. While scratching my bed head, I pull on the high class curtains. I casually look at my watch. It’s 5:22am. I hear a distant echo of rapid knocking on a door. It’s not my room, it’s a different one. I anxiously knock on Sakurako-san’s door, and Nanako-san is there.

“What’s wrong?”

I wonder if she’s feeling better than yesterday. Somehow, she looks more pale.

“Umm, that…”

“Nanako-san, what did the doctor say?!”

Before Nanako-san can answer her, Ms. Kimiko hurries over and shouts at her while wearing a yukata that looks like nightwear.

“He’s coming soon!”

“Doctor…?”

I can feel their urgency. Someone must be sick, or injured.

“Grandmother, what is..”

Shouko-san shows up, looking tired. She slips into a thin cardigan. I look away.

“My grandfather seemed strange. I wonder if the daughter of the Kujo family knows something. She have a relative that’s a famous doctor, right?”

“Yes, but…” Shouko-san is being evasive.

Since she has a relative that’s a famous doctor, people think she knows about medicine. Still, Sakurako-san’s uncle was a forensic pathology teacher. Sakurako-san is certainly an

expert. Even so, that doesn't mean she knows about living humans, only gathering information from those that are already dead.

"I have called an ambulance for now, so we'll wait and see."

"But…" Ms. Kimiko says.

However, it isn't unreasonable for Shouko-san to hesitate. I don't think she'd want Ms. Kimiko and the others to see Ariwara-san's fiancée's "usual appearance."

"Let's go."

It seems Shouko-san notices something, and looks at Sakurako-san, who is behind her.

"Sa-sacchan!" Shouko-san yells.

Before I can think, I shout too. Sakurako-san, who was sleeping normally, it wearing a men's white shirt, without her jeans. The lace of her white underwear is visible from under her shirt.

"Sakurako-san! You can't do that!"

Anyway, it doesn't matter – Shouko-san takes her back to the room. Sakurako-san is forcibly pushed back into the room to put her jeans back on.

"Is he feeling okay?" Ms. Kimiko says with a pale face, making my chest feel heavy. I'm worried she's going to faint.

"Well, he's not breathing, so Shintaro-san is giving him a cardiac massage."

"Huh?!"

-'It wouldn't be surprising for my him to stabbed.' I knew his condition was pretty bad, but I'm surprised. At the same time, I remember what Yachiyo-san said last night.

"Is there an AED nearby?" Sakurako-san says as she walks closer, after she finishes putting on her jeans.

"I'll go look," Nanako-san says, hurrying out of the room.

"Every morning, Nanako-san goes into his room to open the curtains, but he was collapsed next to the desk…" Ms. Kimiko's voice tembles.

When I enter the room, Mr. Seijirou is lying in the space between the desk and the sofa. His face looks horrified and pale, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"This-"

That's enough. I let a groan out. At first glance, I already know it's too late. There are two men beside Mr. Seijirou, who has already begun to faintly smell like death. There's Shintaro-san, and a young man with brown hair named Kouji-san. Kouji-san is pushing all his weight down on Mr. Seijirou's chest, giving him a frantic cardiac massage. Sakurako-san frowns when she sees that.

"Your rhythm is too fast. Chest compressions are done 100 times per minute. Do you like children's anime? The cat robot and the anpan hero. The rhythm of the theme song from that is perfect. Well, it's not like the rhythm matters much at this point." Sakurako-san says bluntly.

"What do you mean by that?!"

"He probably can't be resurrected anymore."

"How can you say that?! You don't know that yet!" Kouji-san yells.

However, even I know that Mr. Seijirou is already dead. His family members are probably the only ones who don't understand. Or maybe they just don't want to admit it.

"Then let me explain."

Sakurako-san instructs Kouji-san to put Mr. Seijirou's face on his right knee. She inspects his wide open eyes, slowly tilts his head back, and looks at his chin and neck, then snorts.

"His corneas haven't gotten cloudy yet. Livor mortis has appeared, but moves as the body moves. His temporomandibular joint is rigid, as well as his limbs, to some extent. From this, we can assume it has been about 4 hours since his death."

"He was drinking alcohol until late last night…" Kouji-san's voice shakes as he turns around.

"Midnight was the last time anyone saw the master's face. Of course, he didn't have enough for it to be considered drinking, it was more of a sip."

"That means he probably died at around 1 or 2 in the morning. Was he coughing? Was he coughing in the evening?"

"Maybe a little bit…"

"Hmm. At first glance, there's no other reasonable explanations. The most important thing is the dried, white foam left around his mouth."

Sakurako-san closes Mr. Seijirou's eyelids, while Yachiyo-san and her two sisters rush in with loud footsteps. Behind them is Ms. Kimiko and Shouko-san, who changed clothes.

"Grandfather!"

The sisters push Sakurako-san and I away, and huddle around Mr. Seijirou. It seems like Sakurako-san wanted to look at Mr. Seijirou's corpse a bit more, but she can't do unreasonable things today, so I bring her to the doorway. I pull her backwards while she tries to look at the body.

"What happened? How's his condition?"

Shouko-san comes into the room after us. Sakurako-san shakes her head.

"The right side of his heart could have failed. I can't tell you an exact diagnosis, but I heard he developed arrhythmia a few years ago, and he's taking heart medicine, so it could have cause an acute exacerbation of heart failure."

In other words, his symptoms suddenly worsened. As I listen to Sakurako-san's speech, Shouko-san loses her strength, and falls to her knees. She's already realized that he's dead. She knows well that Sakurako-san could never fail to notice a dead body.

"…Geez, I've had enough."

Still, I can't ask for confirmation. Shouko-san clings to Sakurako-san's knees, and tries to squeeze out her words. She can barely talk.

"Unfortunately, all his cells are collapsing right now."

"That's… Ah, what do you…" Shouko-san lays on the floor, groaning.

At the same time, we can start to hear a siren. Looking through the windows in the hallway, I can start to see the red lights.

"The ambulance is coming!" Someone says.

But it's still too late.

"I… need to change my clothes."

I notice for the first time after Sakurako-san informs me that I'm wearing pyjamas, so I leave Mr. Seijirou's bedroom. Once the paramedics come, they'll explain everything. It's painful

to look at right now, so I run away.

Part six

With hope, the members of the Toudou family transports Mr. Seijirou to a hospital he's acquainted with. They attempt general resuscitation techniques, but ultimately he's pronounced dead. Even though rigor mortis has already begun, Sakurako-san has to explain for the bereaved family members to understand.

"The doctor said… It's just as Sakurako said, it was heart failure." Yachiyo-san says to Shouko-san over the phone with a calm voice.

Since everyone was out of the house, Shouko-san offered to house sit while they're at the hospital. After a little while, I enter the room and sit on the sofa in silence. I feel like I'm going to cry while I'm staring at my feet, so I go to the kitchen to make tea for myself. Nanako-san is in the kitchen with red eyes.

"The master is dead, isn't he?"

After a bit of hesitation, I nod. After several seconds of having her head down, she takes a deep breath and switches moods. We begin preparing tea and breakfast. I don't feel like eating, but as soon as I smell the thinly sliced toast, and the cooking eggs and bacon, I'm suddenly hungry. After taking a moderate amount of food, I return my tray to its spot with Shouko-san. Sakurako-san's tray has the same food, warm black tea, and pudding on it.

"You aren't eating?" I ask, but Shouko-san just slowly looks up and asks, "why pudding?"

"I like the… sweet things… they're like medicine that makes you happy during sad times."

Only drinking tea when you're hungry is bad for your stomach, so if she doesn't want to eat breakfast, this might be easier to eat – of course she could mean that. Then, after staring at me for a while, Shouko-san laughs in a self-deprecating way.

"… I'm not that sad. I'm just exhausted."

"Huh?"

To my surprise, she smiles.

"My real grandmother… isn't Ms. Kimiko."

"…Wh- what do you mean?"

I thought she was going to talk about Mr. Seijirou. She suddenly starts talking about something completely different, so I try to wrap my head around her sudden confession.

"But I'm not an illegitimate child. My real grandmother is Kimiko's younger sister… That's why everyone says I'm my grandfather's favourite."

"Younger sister…"

My heart suddenly starts to beat harder. Their faces are similar, and they're both beautiful, so I didn't doubt that she was Ms. Kimiko's granddaughter.

"I heard she was close with her sister. Even after my grandmother got married, I hear she still visited often. However, she eventually caught grandfather's attention… Then, while she was pregnant, grandfather forcibly-"

After a pause, Shouko-san forces her words out.

"That's…" I let out a groan.

“That’s terrible,” or “that’s something you don’t have to say.” I’m not sure myself what my words were supposed to mean. But still, I wonder why she decided to tell me that. Shouko-san doesn’t stop talking, though.

“They say my grandmother died during childbirth due to complications, but in reality, she committed suicide. Ms. Kimiko raised my mother and I well, but my mother still went through a lot of hardship… and hated my grandfather.”

Oh… I see now. That’s why Shouko-san doesn’t like this house… I quietly listen to Shouko-san vent. I feel like I caught a glimpse of the gentle, thoughtfulness in her firm attitude. I don’t know if she was born like that, or if she became that way.

“I resemble my grandmother, and she loves me enough. Maybe that’s why she treats me like I’m her child. Still, my mother couldn’t forgive him, and she suffered from it… Then, just like that, she fell ill.” Shouko-san’s voice starts to sound wet with tears. She sounds like she’s spitting out feelings from deep in her chest. “My grandfather passed away, and I’m not even sad about it. But now, more than anything, I feel relieved. Still, I’m exhausted… I wonder why people are dying in such scary ways...”

After saying so much, Shouko-san wants to be alone for a while. She seems to be thinking hard about something and worrying, and leaves the room occasionally. When she comes back, she has regained her composure. I start to make various preparations, since Ms. Kimiko hasn’t come back yet.

“Last time I had a big farewell ceremony is was when Akihito was being cremated.”

“Huh? Don’t you only have family at a wake and funeral?”

This is my first time hearing about a ceremony before a cremation, I’m surprised.

“My grandfather isn’t religious.”

So they won’t have a ceremony? Although it surprises me, hearing that Mr. Seijirou isn’t religious convinces me. He doesn’t seem like he believes in a God. Some people just don’t seem like that.

The Toudou family comes back from Mr. Seijirou’s corpse at around 2pm. I feel like I’m being a bother and an annoyance, so I’m thinking of going home. Still, since nearby relatives keep coming over for the funeral, and the Toudou family is receiving a lot of condolence calls, they’re short on manpower. People in deep sorrow shouldn’t have to go general chores, so I help by doing odd jobs. Eventually I notice it’s already evening, so I decide to stay another night. Even so, by 10pm everyone has stopped, and the Toudou family has calmed down. There isn’t a wake, and there’s a lot of people, so Ms. Kimiko asks everyone to go home.

The house goes back to the way it was yesterday evening. A while after I finish dinner, there’s a knock on the door. I think it’s Yachiyo-san.

“Kimiko’s mother won’t let anyone drink. The alcohol Naoe brought yesterday is untouched.”

Everyone eats dinner at different times, and I’m sure the family needs some time to remember the dead before he’s cremated. I think that Sakurako-san and I are out of place, but it seems Ms. Kimiko invited us. I don’t feel like I can refuse, so I decide to stay. I know I can’t drink alcohol without anyone finding out, and it seems Ms. Kimiko already knows I’m a minor, but nobody else is interested in me. I’m meekly following behind Skaurako-san… I decide to head to the dining room.

Kazumi-san, Toudou family's oldest daughter, as well as Shintarou-san, Kouji-san, and Ms. Kimiko are there. Everyone looks tired, and the atmosphere is bleak. The Nanao-san couple will be a bit late, so we decided to start without them. Even after we all sit down and get drinks, the dark mood doesn't change. Nobody is talking. Like Shouko-san, it seems everyone is more exhausted than they are mourning and grieving.

"Well then, should we have a toast?"

As soon as nobody can stand the silence for any longer, Yachiyo-san changes the mood with her loud voice.

"I don't think we should toast."

Upon hearing that, Kazumi gets angry. Kazumi-san is the oldest sibling, at around 60 years old. Her face resembles Mr. Seijirou more, but her voice sounds to similar to Ms. Kimiko's that I thought she said it at first.

"Why? Shouldn't you have a toast when something good happens? Doesn't everyone else want to?"

"Even if it's a joke, you shouldn't say that." Now Ms. Kimiko is doing the scolding.

Yachiyo-san doesn't want to make the situation worse, so she shrugs her shoulders.

"It better be a joke. I'm also disappointed in Kouji. He rewrote the will."

Kouji-san looks up in surprise, then looks sick.

"But everyone is secretly happy, right? He won't be manipulating anyone anymore. First of all, I don't like how he was so spiteful. That man did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. It wasn't a peaceful death. I'll laugh as I see him off."

After saying all that, Yachiyo-san holds up her glass of beer to "toast," then drinks it all in one gulp. For a moment, Ms. Kimiko stares at her daughter, dumbfounded, but then her expression starts to change.

"…That's right."

"Mother, what are you saying?!" Kazumi-san looks like she's about to faint, and speaks in a surprised tone.

"I think laughing as you see him off would be a good fit for him."

Ms. Kimiko pulls her sleeve back to keep it out of the way, then pours another glass of beer for Yachiyo-san. Shintarou-san, who is sitting between Ms. Kimiko and Yachiyo-san, quietly raises his glass to Yachiyo-san's.

"Let's toast again, Shintarou-san."

Shintarou-san says, "you're the leader," then holds his glass up to Kanazawa-san's. He then looks at Ms. Kimiko. Kimiko nods. She gets up from her chair, holding a bottle of beer to her chest like a knight's sword, and takes a deep breath.

"To the president… Our Don Juan."

Don Juan – she must be talking about the mythical European lady killer. With that said, Shintarou-san raises his glass, and smiles as he clinks it. Only Kanazawa-san, who is holding his glass in one hand, is in tears. After slapping his back, and clinking his glass, Shintarou-san drinks all his beer in one gulp. Then, the atmosphere quickly starts to relax, and the small number of people here have a calm mood. The only thing of interest is Kouji-san trying to talk to Sakurako-san, who is ignoring him.

“Let’s drink his favourite alcohol,” Yachiyo-san says, as she brings out more alcohol with a mischievously expression. “It’s Dante wine.” She says, picking up a bottle of wine.

“It’s wine made by the descendants of Dante, who was famous for ‘the divine comedy.’ My grandfather was French, but he went to Italy for wine, especially this particular winery. My grandfather especially liked this vintage wine the best.”

Kouji-san grabs a wine opener, opens the bottle, and pours a glass of the wine. He seems to be quite knowledgeable about wine, he might even be a wine snob.

He apparently works at foreign offices now, and he came to this house right after landing at the airport from Singapore. He seems quite proud of it when he mentioned it to Shouko-san. Of course, Shouko-san mostly ignored him. Eventually, the Nanao couple arrive, and enter the dining room. I wonder if they had a fight, since there seems to be some distance between them. Maybe they’re having problems with money?

“Oh, wine.”

Since Sakurako-san and Shouko-san won’t pay attention to him, Kouji-san turns his attention to the Nanao-san couple. He fills a glass with red wine, and hands it to Nanao-san. At that moment, as if he couldn’t bear it anymore, Kanazawa-san starts wailing.

“Hey, don’t cry. It’s good that he died from illness. My father thought he was going to be murdered someday!”

It’s none other than Yachiyo-san trying to noisily comfort him. She knows that she’ll be scolded by Ms. Kimiko or Kazumi-san. Then, that moment, a loud crash echoes through the room.

“Wha…?!”

When we look towards the sound, I’m surprised to see Nanao-san’s chest dyed red. Nanao-san’s face is pale, and her lips are trembling. I shudder. It looks like blood, making me dizzy for a moment.

“Don’t worry. It’s just wine.” Sakurako-san says it so bluntly, it makes me feel like I was the only one worried.

It seems that Nanao-san didn’t grab the wine glass that Kouji-san handed to her. In addition to Nanao-san’s chest, her meal on the table is also submerged in purplish red.

“That’s going to leave a stain.”

Shouko-san seems relieved that it’s not blood, and stands up with her handkerchief. The stuffy atmosphere starts to dissipate, and people restart their conversations. Her husband is sitting next to me. He asks his wife, “what are you doing…” while wiping her with the table cloth.

“Don’t touch me!”

“Nanao…?”

She shakes off his hand, and pushes away her confused husband. Once again, everyone’s gazes gather on Nanao-san. Ms. Kimiko notices her daughter’s face seems urgent, and walks over to her.

“I’m sorry, mother…” Nanao-san cries loudly, and clings to Ms. Kimiko’s chest.

“What?”

Although Nanao-san’s clothes are soaked with red wine, Ms. Kimiko doesn’t seem to care, and strokes her back gently.

“It’s about your father.” With a quivering voice, Nanao-san points at her husband.

“He killed father… That person, Toshiyuki-san.”

Part seven

After the sudden confession, the dining hall falls silent. For a moment, I don’t understand what was said. Nanao-san’s spouse, Toshiyuki-san, is staring blankly. His face turns red, and he starts to tremble.

“W-what are you talking about, Nanao!” He says frantically, and grabs Nanao-san.

“Noooo!” As he grabs her, Nanao-san screams like she’s being murdered.

Ms. Kimiko puts herself in front of her daughter to protect her. As expected of sisters, Yachiyo-san and Kazumi-san rush over to protect Nanao-san, as well.

“I’m sorry, mother. It was Toshiyuki-san who killed father. He would rather die than accept money from someone else… But what if he could get some through inheritance? Two people said so this evening…” A shiver runs up Ms. Kimiko’s spine as Nanao-san continues. “He is able to get arsenic through work connections, and could kill him by poisoning his food and pretending it’s something else, but he actually… When he left the room in the evening…”

“That’s enough!” Toshiyuki-san yells out.

“I’m going to call the police!” Kouji-san says in a panic, and grabs Toshiyuki-san.

“You’re wrong! It wasn’t me! Everyone is being deceived, it was Nanao-san who killed him!”

Toshiyuki-san struggles away from Kouji-san, with a vein bulging on his temple. He points at Nanao-san. Nanao-san also refutes with a red face.

“Stop lying!”

“What are you saying? You’re the one who killed him! Are you going to pin the crime on me?! You left your room in the middle of the night, didn’t you?! You said you were going to get some alcohol, but you were gone for more than an hour!”

“That’s…” Nanao-san’s voice trembles, she’s visibly upset.

Even though it’s strange, she seems upset at her surroundings.

“Hurry up! Call the police!” Nanao-san shouts.

That strange behaviour is enough to start making all of us suspicious. Shintarou-san holds up the phone that Kanazawa-san gave him, but he seems hesitant to make the report.

“Please believe me, I really didn’t kill him. I don’t have any arsenic.”

Shintarou-san takes the cordless phone, while Toshiyuki-san and Kouji-san look at each other.

“Anyway, we can ask the police to investigate it. Shintarou-san, hurry up and report it.” Kouji-san urges.

But Shintarou-san still doesn’t call 110. Maybe it really was Nanao-san who did it… That’s probably what he’s thinking. Whether they did it or not, anyone would hesitate to report a family member.

“…Well, there’s something else I’m wondering about.”

It seems Kouji-san doesn’t think so. He glares at Shintarou-san, and speaks in a low voice.

“What?” Shintarou-san’s eyes widen.

“Just as I thought. I don’t know if it’s true, but I feel slightly uneasy about it.”

“Kouji-san? What are you talking about?”

Hearing Kouji-san’s words, Ms. Kimiko quickly asks.

“It’s Kanazawa. He did it.”

Kouji-san points to Kanazawa-san, who is standing next to Shintarou-san.

“Kanazawa-san… What do you mean?”

“He’s a murderer! The servant, Masanori Kanazawa, murdered him!” Kouji-san glares at Kanazawa-san, and snorts.

“Huh? …No, I would never…”

Kanazawa-san seems to be honestly surprised that everyone is suddenly pointing their suspicion at him. I take a look around the room.

“That’s right. Kanazawa-san has been serving him for a long time!” Ms. Kimiko quickly objects.

“…Well, if you’re around him for that long, there would be many reasons to kill him.”

Since we clear up the suspicion, Nanao-san still mutters with relief.

“That’s right… I actually saw it.”

Kouji-san and Shintarou-san nod with understanding.

“…That’s a false accusation.”

Following his line of sight, Shintarou-san wrinkles his eyebrows, and glares at Kouji-san.

“Is that so? Tell the guests, then. What did Kanazawa-san do to grandfather, and tell them about her mother.”

“Huh…?!”

Until then, he was just a bystander, so he seems really surprised that the suspicion is turned on him. I look to Sakurako-san for help, but she seems uninterested despite the uproar, and eats the grapes on the tables.

“Kouji-san, please stop!”

Even though Ms. Kimiko tries to stop him, Kouji-san looks straight at me, and points to Shintarou-san.

“This person’s mother is Kanazawa’s wife. Grandfather cheated with her, and she gave birth to him. Kanazawa pretended to be faithful as always, but I’m sure he was waiting for the right timing for murder! That has to be it!”

“Huh…?”

Kanazawa-san hangs his head.

“Sh…”

Shintarou-san shuts his mouth tight, and groans with regret. From what Yachiyo-san told me, I already knew that Ms. Kimiko wasn’t her real mother. Still… Hearing for the first time that her mother is Kanazawa-san’s wife is gut wrenching. But… That must be why Seijirou was called “president” instead of “father.” This person isn’t even descended from Ms. Kimiko’s children. I can’t forgive Seijirou-san. I don’t agree with talking ill of people who died, but what Yachiyo-san said… I understand completely.

Still, I can’t imagine Kanazawa-san doing something like that. Sakurako-san always says that murderous intent is like a disease. I look back at Sakurako-san for confirmation.

However, Sakurako-san seems too occupied with lining up her grapes on the table like a child – it's no good, she doesn't notice me. I'm thinking really hard about this.

"Umm… In that case, why does it have to be last night? Most people target someone in one day, but if you want to feign death by disease, wouldn't a delay be better?"

"…Huh?"

Kouji-san stares at me for a moment. He looks like he's asking if I'm sure… He soon shakes his head and denies what I said.

"No… But I'm sure of what I saw that evening. Naoe brought brought cognac and durian to grandfather's room."

"Grandfather… did like durian. Besides, he bought durian as a souvenir, right? Why is there a connection between that and someone dying?"

Ms. Kimiko responds to protect Kanazawa-san. I think Kanazawa-san trusts Mr. Seijirou's wife.

"One problem was the alcohol! Combining durian and alcohol can be life threatening! His stomach melted, so there was nothing that could be done. Doesn't everyone know that?!"

Bam! Kouji-san hits the table in frustration. A nearby glass falls over, and a new red stain spreads across the table cloth. Nobody knows about the relationship between durian and alcohol, causing confusion to spread amongst us. Honestly, I don't know anything about durians, besides the scent.

"I also think that someone else was in the room, so my grandfather certainly could have only drank the alcohol, and someone else ate the durian… but there's also a good chance that he died from that. Anyway, we should turn this person in to the police. If this is true, it's still murder."

"But I was told to…"

Kanazawa-san replies with a deeply troubled expression. We can't deny the possibility that Seijirou-san died from having durian and alcohol. In this case, how much of Kanazawa-san's guilt will be questioned? Job-related, accidental homicide? At least, he asked for it himself. I don't think that Kanazawa-san is a murderer. However, Kouji-san seems intent that Kanazawa-san is the offender.

"Stop making up excuses!" Kouji-san yells.

Kanazawa-san shrinks back. Then, Shintarou-san runs into the room, shouting, "don't make excuses!"

"That person was always near the president. If he wanted to kill him, he would have done it a long time ago. It didn't have to be today, it would have been better to kill him when he collapsed."

"I think so, too. If he left traces of evidence, having more people around would make more suspects. The body is clearly made to look like he died of an illness. If Kanazawa-san was the murderer, it would be unnatural to kill him this morning."

Shintarou-san's words take over, making me affirm my suspicions. If anything, it doesn't seem likely that Kanazawa-san killed Mr. Toudou.

"There's always a reason for murder. It's the same for bones in the human body."

Shintarou-san nods firmly at my words, sighs deeply, then puts the phone back on the table, saying, "that's right, a motive."

“Even if drinking alcohol and eating durian was the cause, the most important thing is that the president didn’t eat any durian or drink cognac last night.”

“Huh?”

Kouji-san looks back and forth between Shintarou-san and Kanazawa-san.

“It’s true.” Shintarou-san says clearly, then he sits down in his chair, looking tired.

“That should be…”

“No. I verified it myself, so there’s no mistake. It’s because I prepared a different bottle of alcohol. The president only drank a tiny bit of alcohol.”

“Are you trying to defend Kanazawa?! You were raised as Kanazawa’s son until you were 13 years old!” Kouji-san says, aggressively.

Shintarou-san lets out a deep sigh, and looks like he’s thinking hard about something while he plays with his bangs.

“I’m not trying to defend him. It’s something different.”

Holding his head in his hand, Shintarou-san repeats the word “different.”

“No. You wanted to do an excellent job so grandfather would notice you, but you were never informed that you’re blood related to the Toudou family. You always thought Kanazawa-san was your real father. That’s why you’re trying to defend him!”

Kouji-san makes a triumphant face, then looks around the room. He looks like he’s confirming that everyone thinks his reason is perfect. But nobody is agreeing with him. In frustration, he takes his smart phone out of his pocket, and says, “let’s report this.” Shintarou-san stands up when he sees that.

“It was me!” Shintarou-san says violently.

“Huh?”

“It really is different… Because I killed the president.”

For a moment, nobody knows what to say. Kouji-san stares blankly at his smartphone.

“…Huh?”

“It’s because of you, Kouji-kun.” Shintarou-san squeezes out those words bitterly.

“Why is it my-“

“Not only are you in charge of the IT company, but you also manage the Toudou tourism group. Last night, the president told me about how you’re going to succeed him! After all, I’m not a legitimate child. You’re not the oldest son, but you’re still a legitimate member of the Toudou family. You have the right to succeed him.”

Shintarou-san violently slams his hands on the table, soaking his clothes with alcohol, then covers his face.

“The president told me dozens of times that if I did my best, I would get to succeed him. Otherwise I’ll have outlived my usefulness. If I wanted to work, I only had to work for Kouji, and get a wife that Kouji approves of. In that case, my children will also end up working for this family…”

“It can’t be…”

What a speech. How cruel was Mr. Seijirou? Kouji-san doesn’t seem to have a response, but his mouth is open.

“I just remembered the Japanese apricot tree in the yard. The fruit is green when it’s unripe. The unripened fruit seeds supposedly contains a poison similar to potassium cyanide. I

just went to the garden, took the unripened fruit to the president's room… I thought that if I put it in wine, it would mask the bitter taste."

Shintarou-san slowly looks up, and stares at the bottle of wine that he knocked over.

"Is… Is that true…?" Kouji-san asks, as he turns pale.

Shintarou-san slowly nods. I look at Sakurako-san. I want to know if a poison like that really exists. I can't believe it, but even in a situation like this, she's leaning against her elbow on the table with her eyes closed.

"By the way, someone was in the garden last night. They hid in a panic, so I didn't see their face." Nanao-san says.

Toshiyuki-san quietly asks his wife, "why did they hide?" with a puzzled expression. Nanao-san hides behind Ms. Kimiko frantically.

"Valpolicella Classico… This is the same wine. I haven't confirmed whether or not the president drank any. However, if that's how he died, maybe-"

"Don't say that!" Kanazawa-san's shouts angrily over Shintarou-san.

Kanazawa-san vigorously hits Shintarou's cheek right in front of us. There's a loud sound as a wine glass breaks, and a wine bottle and phone roll on the floor.

"What have you been towards for almost 50 years?! You killed someone!"

"Father…"

Shintarou-san slumps in his chair and groans when he looks up at Kanazawa-san. Kanazawa-san is visibly angry. He's terrifyingly different from his small, gentle self from before. Yachiyo-san hurriedly moves between the two.

"Stop! Wait, what about the glass? You didn't get cut? Are you dirty? It's still not clear if father really drank the wine! The doctor said it was a heart problem!"

Yachiyo-san's knees start to bleed from the pieces of cup that are scattered on the floor. She doesn't seem to notice it, and clings to Shintarou-san to protect him. However, surely she's right. The diagnosis given at the hospital was a heart attack. Originally, he was being treated for chronic heart failure, but Sakurako-san says that's useless if he has an attack. If he had really been killed by potassium cyanide, wouldn't the doctor have seen signs of it?

"... That's right. We haven't decided that he died from Shintarou-san's wine yet, Kanazawa-san." Kazumi-san, who has been silent until now, exhales with a sad look as she talks. "After all… It wasn't only Shintarou-san who tried to kill father. Nanao also wanted him to die."

Kazumi-san looks at Nanao-san and her husband. She slowly picks up the wine, and puts it back on the table. She stands next to Shintarou-san, with her head hung down.

"I'm the same, I also wanted father to die… Maybe I killed him."

"... Big sister?" Yachiyo-san says breathlessly.

"Last week… I saw on the news that people with heart disease shouldn't take ED medicine, so I gave some to my father as a joke. Even if they don't need it, people can still use ED medicine for vitality, right? I thought it was a joke."

After saying that, Kazami-san creates a sound from her throat. She just said something terrifying. She still doesn't stop talking.

"...I didn't see the servant, Nanako last night. Maybe she was in father's room. She might have… given him medicine."

“Why did you do that…”

People talk, one after another. Ms. Kimiko seems to surprised that she’s about to collapse from all the murderous intentions that are being revealed in secession. Shouko-san supports her back in a panic. Kazumi-san looks disgusted, while Ms. Kimiko shakes her head.

“After all, wasn’t father 90 years old!? I kept mother quiet, and I didn’t say anything about it, but father got one of the housekeepers pregnant last year! And now, I’m wary of Nanako. How embarrassing… how old did he have to be to stop this?!”

“That’s why… You really… How…”

“If he died from ED medicine, he’d be suffering the consequences of his actions. I didn’t think he’d really take it, I…”

Just then, Kazumi-san lets out a loud cry and bursts into tears. For the first time, I see Shintarou-san scream and cry. Thinking about it, it’s strange. Even though their father or grandfather has just died, none of the family members seem sad. I guess that symbolizes Mr. Seijirou’s way of living.

“... It can’t be helped, everyone wanted him to die.”

Yachiyo-san holds her crying older sister’s shoulder, and mutters something comforting.

“There’s nobody in the world that you can’t hold back from killing!” Ms. Kimiko’s sharp words are filled with resentment.

“How beautiful! Really mother, even you thought about killing father, right? You’ve been betrayed by him this whole time!” Yachiyo-san snaps back at Ms. Kimiko, though.

For a moment, Ms. Kimiko looks daunted.

“I did not hate your father. There was a time thinking about him was painful, but only at first. I was happy to be married to him.”

“You’re lying!”

“No, I really was! Otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to stand being married to him!” Ms. Kimiko spits out her words like an angry fireball.

Everyone falls silent, leaving only the echoes in the dining room.

“...No matter what all of you think, I was happy. Then, I was given a lot of babies to raise. Because of that, I can enjoy watching my grandchildren grow up. Is that anything but happiness?” Each of Ms. Kimiko’s words sound sad. Her eyes start to turn red, and fill with tears.

Yachiyo-san doesn’t deny her words anymore. No, not just Yachiyo-san, but nobody does. The dining room is silent.

“...I will go to the police.”

There’s silence for a moment. A cold air fills the room, until Kazumi-san mutters.

“This isn’t good! The doctor ruled it as a heart attack! Our father has suffered enough! Geez… That’s it.”

Yachiyo-san finally starts to cry. I’m not sure what to do, so I look to Shouko-san. She sits next to her sister expressionlessly, biting her lip.

“No, it’s no good. But let me go to the police. What I did can’t be forgiven. I need to be punished.” Shintarou-san says with a powerful tone.

“No… a child’s failure is the parent’s failure, so I’ll go… You need to protect the “Toudou family until the end.” Kanazawa-san says with a tormented look.

“Father…”

Shintarou-san’s face is warped with sadness. Suddenly, the dining room is filled with laughter.

“Sa… Sakurako… san?”

I don’t know what’s happening for a moment, and I’m not sure if it’s really laughter. The more I listen, the more clear it becomes that it’s a laugh coming from Sakurako-san’s mouth.

“Hey, are you finished yet?”

I thought she was asleep, but she slowly opens her eyes while laughing, until she takes a deep breath.

“What is it?” Kouji-san asks, darting his eyes around.

“How long are all of you going to continue this hilarious farce? I have to drive tomorrow. I’d rather go back to my room soon.”

Kouji-san doesn’t seem to know what to say at first. Sakurako-san gives him the same disagreeable expression as always.

“A farce, you say? Sakurako-san, you don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Sakurako-san always has both good and bad things to say. Sakurako-san doesn’t react to her opponent, and doesn’t seem to care about his harsh words. I hurry to scold her.

“Can you really say it’s not a farce? Even though it’s a party for Mr. Toudou, who liked opera, this is a children’s performance. There’s a limit to how worthless it can be.”

“Wai… A limit… What are you saying!? Did you not hear what everyone was just saying?!”

“I heard. That’s why I’m saying it’s a farce. Mr. Toudou wasn’t killed.”

“...What do you mean?” Kouji-san asks again in surprise.

Sakurako-san wrinkles her nose in obvious disgust, and stomps her foot.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. Mr. Toudou wasn’t killed.”

“Wh…?”

All eyes in the room fall on Sakurako-san. She wrinkles her eyebrows like she’s bothered, then sits down.

“Was grandfather really not killed?” Shouko-san asks.

“Oh, I can guarantee it.”

“...How can you say that?” Kouji-san asks, but Sakurako-san wrinkles her nose again.

It ruins her perfectly nice face. Sakurako-san leans back in her chair, crosses her legs, and folds her fingers into a triangle in front of her mouth. It’s a habit of her’s when she thinks hard about something.

“Let’s see… First of all, the cause of death was not arsenic poisoning. Arsenic poisoning causes vomiting and diarrhea, along with a unique garlic scent. Mr. Toudou‘s body only had a faint smell of death.” As Sakurako-san speaks, Nanao-san looks at Toshiyuki. “So, that means your wife wasn’t going to kill her father when she snuck out of her room last night. It was to meet with a young man outside. That’s why she asked for a separate room. Since there’s a back door, she could easily invite the man inside.”

“Wha…” Nanao-san’s face turns red. “You-!”

It seems Toshiyuki-san doesn’t know what to think. His face turns red with anger, as he glares at his wife.

“If you want to know if it’s true, ask the crime preventing device. I put a crime preventing camera at the back door - ah, I should think of a better spot next time. Your rendezvous was in full view from the window in my room. The moonlight is brighter than you think.” Sakurako-san was grinning at everyone in the first half of her statement, and at Nanao-san in the second half.

The women in the room murmur “oh my…” and “no wonder…” in an embarrassed voice. Nanao-san is so embarrassed that her face goes past red, and turns pale.

“As for the durian and brandy, there’s not medical basis for combining the two being harmful. There has been stories of eating too much and dying, but never a case of someone’s stomach melting. In Japan, you usually hear about eel and umeboshi. Well, to get sick from being drunk is another story.”

“But, the place is actually…” Kouji-san makes a flustered objection.

“I have heard of it occurring. In the end, it’s just superstition. Besides, you said you didn’t see him eat them. You can confirm in the kitchen - there’s wine and unripe apricots.” Sakurako-san walks toward Shintarou-san. “I have 1 question. How many unripe apricot pits did you put in the wine?”

“...About 10.”

“I see, 10.”

Sakurako-san snickers, and the corners of her mouth turn up. She’s mocking him.

“Certainly, unripe apricots contain amygdalin, a cyanogenic glycoside, but you would need to eat a large amount to cause potential death. However, even though it’s a hydrocyanic acid, potassium cyanide is a different substance. Potassium cyanide generally refers to a cyanide alkali compound. Amygdalin, sometimes called vitamin B17, isn’t toxic on its own. However, if taken by oral ingestion, it’s broken down in the intestine, and turned into hydrogen cyanide. It’s similar to potassium cyanide, but the lethal dose for an adult is 200 to 300 seeds**.** Someone wouldn’t die from just 10 of them, but they might get a stomach ache.”

“200… to 300?”

Shintarou-san looks shocked. Sakurako-san sees his reaction, and stifled a laugh.

“No matter how deadly a poison is, there’s always a lethal dose. Digitalis is considered a great poison, but in small doses, it can be used as heart medicine.”

Sakurako-san puts her elbows on the table, and traces the edges of the fallen glass with her finger. Her finger gets wet with a red drop.

“Also… You don’t seem to drink wine. Yesterday you were drinking stengah.”

Shintarou-san shrugs his shoulders. But Sakurako-san isn’t wrong. I’m sure that he hasn’t touched Kouji-san’s wine today.

“It’s fine if you don’t understand. Mr. Toudou was a loud drunk. Still, he would never drink just any random alcohol. He was also very knowledgeable about wine.”

“...A decanter, huh?” Shouko-san says quickly.

“My grandfather loved wine. When he poured vintage wine, the air would fill with the sweet scent, and he would sip it from a glass for hours.”

Sakurako-san nods to Shouko-san’s words, and pushes the glass with her finger. That means it was the right answer.

“That’s right. For someone who loves wine, it's improper to drink a good vintage wine right from the bottle. It’s important to move it to a decanter first to be ‘separated’ to fully enjoy

the scent. If you go through the work of moving the container, you'll notice the presence of particles. The decanter also helps remove stagnation."

Kouji-san looks at the wine bottle, shrinks his shoulders, and makes a reassured face. Sakurako-san looks at Kouji-san and closes her eyes. She looks happy.

"Oh, I haven't mentioned this yet. Mr. Toudou probably didn't drink any wine. It would be impossible not to notice that there's a foreign object in it, so if he noticed, he probably wouldn't have drank it. Besides, if Mr. Toudou had died from cyanide poisoning, none of us would be safe from it, either. The breath of a person who died of cyanide poisoning is very dangerous. There's toxic hydrogen cyanide in the vapour."

As they listen to Sakurako-san's explanation, Yachiyo-san puts her hands on Shintarou-san's shoulder. Shintarou-san clasps his hands together. His hands tremble.

"Finally, Mr. Toudou didn't take any of the ED medicine. I saw it was handed to visitors of yesterday's party. I also confirmed something else. Mr. Toudou said 'This is unnecessary'." Sakurako-san raises her voice as she starts to laugh.

The women start to blush, but the men look to each other in confusion. I'm ashamed of Sakurako-san for saying that. Only Kazumi-san holds her chest in relief.

"Also, the housekeeper, Nanako, didn't go to Mr. Toudou's room last night. Yesterday, she shouldn't have left her room if she was that sick… but perhaps it's because she's pregnant?"

Sakurako-san continues, still laughing from the back of her throat. Instantly, everyone's faces begin to change colour. Ms. Kimiko's expression is so emotionless that it's scary.

"What did you say? ...What do you mean? Nanako would have said something, right?" Ms. Kimiko says in a quiet voice. Her eyes narrow.

"No, she hasn't said anything."

"I wonder about that."

"Last night, when she was in sick, you said, 'Hurry back to your room and get something to eat.' When someone has a cold, it's normal to recommend something nutritious to eat, but you didn't do that. You spoke like you knew she would feel better after eating something. Most diseases make someone feel sick when they eat, so it's normal to offer medicine. So my guess for poor health that's relieved by eating would be… Morning sickness, wouldn't it? Well, from Ms. Kimiko's reaction, I don't like I'm wrong."

"..."

Ms. Kimiko's eyes sharpen.

"No way… Is that true, mother?" Kazumi-san asks.

However, Ms. Kimiko keeps her mouth shut, and doesn't respond to the question. A thick tension forms between the mother and her daughter. Kazumi-san wrinkles her eyebrows. I'm sure she's angry. That's probably why Sakurako-san said, "it's true." I finally realize why I got an uncomfortable feeling at that time. The reason why Nanako-san is so scared of Ms. Kimiko. After conceiving her employer's baby, no matter how gentle his wife is, she would still be scared.

"Mother, why-"

"I have the same opinion as the doctor. Mr. Toudou's death was caused by something like a heart attack."

Kazumi-san tries to speak, but Ms. Kimiko interrupts her, just like Sakurako-san does, and speaks quickly.

“The white foam on the edges of his mouth were caused by heart failure. It happens when excess fluid fills the lungs, called a pulmonary edema. In short, it’s like drowning in your own bodily fluids, isn’t it? Are you still going to say something stupid, like say he died of poison?”

“No… But someone had the intent to kill him… They have to make up for their crime.” Shintarou-san says.

He has an expression like he’s thinking hard about something, as he picks up the phone.

“That’s right. So how do we prove it? The murderous intent in your chest is only visible to you.”

“But right now I’m…”

“No, Sakurako-san is right! Shintarou-san, you didn’t kill anyone. You just- just brought wine to the room.”

Kouji-san, who had only been listening until then, hurries to bring the phone to Shintarou-san.

“Shintarou-san, I didn't meant to drive you out of the family. No, I didn't think something like this would happen.” Kouji-san takes a deep breath. “I just… I wanted grandfather to acknowledge my effort. First… When I took over the Toudou company alone, I didn't think I could do it.” Kouji-san mumbles and drops his gaze. His eyes are red. “In my eyes, you’re the one who should take over the family. Back then… I wasn’t always here. Don’t talk about going to the police. Everyone…gets tempted by their urges, right? Please don’t… blame me. You should stay here.”

“Kouji…”

Kouji-san tries to explain himself to Shintarou-san. But still, he’s definitely being honest. It’s hard knowing that someone was just desperate, not really a bad person. Shintarou-san looks surprised. Kouji-san holds out his hand to Shintarou-san for a reconciliation handshake. Shintarou-san hesitates for a moment, but then responds.

“... After all, we’re all the same. I was frightened by my father, I flattered him, and I was struggled. Even my elder sister wanted to protect this house… right?”

Yachiyo-san tightly embraces Kazumi-san. It feels like we shouldn’t talk anymore. Now is time for those who were left behind. While everyone else is talking together, Sakurako-san and I quietly leave the dining room. Turning back to the door, I catch sight of Ms Kimiko. She’s crying, reconciling, and comforting her children. She watches the commotion. Her face is frozen and expressionless, so I don’t know what she’s thinking right now. Is she angry about what her children tried to do? Or maybe she’s glad her family is trying to become one…

“Ah…”

At that moment, my eyes meet with Ms. Kimiko’s. She calmly bows to us. As she lowers her head, for a moment I think I see her lips turn into a smile, but maybe it was just my imagination.

Final part

Regardless of what happens during the night, the morning sun rises. After the night of mourning at the Toudou house, we greet in the morning. Honestly, I couldn't get any sleep, so I plan to sleep in the car on the way back. Sakurako-san is also tired, and looks a little displeased.

Surprisingly, almost everyone is at breakfast. When we get to the dining room, the Nanao couple isn't there. I guess they're another story. Shintarou-san is sitting at the head of the table. Kouji-san is to his left, and Ms. Kimiko to his right. Yachiyo-san and Kazumi-san are next to them. Shintarou-san and Kouji-san talk about work. Ms. Kimiko says "everyone sit at the table" with a soft tone. She seems satisfied to see them so enthusiastic. Anyone who doesn't know them would think they're father and son. They were talking late into the evening last night. They aren't in a bad mood anymore.

I don't know if it's really right to feel a sense of unity over holding shared guilt about a crime. I think the reason someone commits murder is the greatest sin. Still, if I tried to tell that to Sakurako-san, she'd say it's a hindsight based opinion… But I'm still glad that nobody committed a crime. I don't want any of them to be criminals. Of course, things like Nanako-san's baby, and the inheritance are still huge problems. From now on, we'll have to live with this crime in our hearts. I'm sure it's impossible… for everyone to live happily after this. Still, I hope that there will only be a bit of pain in these peoples' futures.

Before the whole family gets together for the cremation, we decide to return to Asahikawa. It's a tradition of the Hokkaido people to never let a guest leave empty-handed. Ms. Kimiko and Kazumi-san cause a fuss to prepare things like hotel soup and melon in a gift box for a souvenir for us. It seems they used a luggage bag that Shouko-san left behind for the souvenir.

Before leaving, we go to burn incense for Mr. Seijirou, and find Yachiyo-san in the room. Mr. Seijirou is laying in his bed. A white cloth is covering his face, and his pale hands are crossed over his chest. He shines in the morning sunlight. Yachiyo-san sits in a chair by the window silently as we burn our incense and put our hands together.

"...He really was a selfish person until the end."

I raise my head at Yachiyo-san's muttering.

"With us… Everything has been confusing until now. Even after he died, it's still tormenting me. He really was a heartless person." She blurts out, squeezing her words. "...At the party last night, I heard everyone was going on a trip soon. Sweden would be nice. I'm looking forward to going there… It looks fun, but I don't want to go alone, and I don't care much for peoples' feelings…"

Tears spill from Yachiyo-san's eyes. I'm both surprised and a bit relieved to see people mourning Mr. Seijirou. After all, blood is thicker than water. Even if they hated him, they still loved him as family.

"Sweden, huh?" Sakurako-san suddenly looks up. "I can teach you one thing. It's legal in Sweden."

"Legal?" Yachiyo-san repeats in confusion.

"You guys. As long as one parent is different, it's legal."

Does Yachiyo-san understand the meaning of those words? I look to Sakurako-san for clarification, but I'm ignored.

"When you say it's legal, what do you mean?"

"That's right… Well, he's thinking about children."

"What?"

She doesn't understand it.

"Anyway, we should leave soon. There's still time today. I'll take you to the Maruyama zoo, then to the museum at the university of Hokkaido. They have lots of bones!"

As I've said many times, I don't want to learn about bones. Putting up resistance against this person is futile, so I'll have to put up with it today.

Before the car leaves, everyone in the Toudou family comes to see us off. Everyone standing under the sun to see us off looks like a family photograph. A while after we leave the Toudou house, on the day of Seijirou Toudou's cremation, his will is revealed. He set aside a piece of inheritance to each child individually. With everything settled, his passing is both happy and sad. In addition to real estate, Shouko-san is also going to receive the cat painting.

At the bookstore, I notice a Hokkaido economic magazine with an article about Mr. Toudou. It's about Mr. Toudou's cruel deeds, and the two people who will lead the company. As expected, the Nanao couple got a divorce. Since then, Nanao-san got remarried to a man who is 20 years younger. She's a strong woman.

Then, a year after Mr. Toudou's passing, I'm sitting in front of the station with Sakurako-san. We just happened to meet there, so we tried to decide where to go when a woman called out to us.

"Oh, hello. Good afternoon."

I think it's Ms. Kimiko. I don't want to ignore her, so I stop to greet her. She moves her stroller into the shade, and we bow politely. She's wearing refined Japanese clothes.

"What's wrong? Is it maybe Shouko-san's place?"

"Yes. I think that girl wanted to show me something." Kimiko-san says delightfully, moving her stroller a bit. Inside is a cute baby with red cheeks, and big eyes. "Her name is Sayaka."

"It's a cute name."

Perhaps… This is Seijirou-san and Nanao-san's baby. Since I don't want to pry, I feel like my assumption is alright. Sakurako-san seems to unexpectedly like babies. She looks at Sayaka-chan and smiles sweetly.

"Before… Kazumi-san almost kicked Nanako out for it, but ended up forgiving her. This child will be the last blood descendent of Seijirou Toudou."

"That's a relief."

Sakurako nods. Ms. Kimiko smiles at the cute baby. The expressions of a mother looking at her child, and a child looking at her grandmother. That baby loves her from the bottom of her heart, her face can't lie. Honestly, I'm surprised that Ms. Kimiko isn't wondering. How can a woman raise her lover's child from another woman with suck affection?

"You really love her, don't you?"

My question seems to have gone in one ear and out the other.

“...Everyone else misunderstands. Ever since... I got married, I didn’t love my husband. I just went along with the partner my parents decided on. Even so, I still love children. That’s why I went through the pain of giving birth year after year. I thought it’d be better if I accepted them, instead of giving birth.”

“No way…”

“Of course, it took a bit of time for me to think that way. They say that excessive tenderness turns to hundredfold hatred, but there might be an opposite. Hatred can turn around and turn to love. I’m truly grateful to my husband, and I love all the children of the Toudou family.” Ms. Kimiko says clearly, holding Sayaka-chan in her arms.

Ms. Kimiko brings her lips to her soft cheek. Sayaka-chan wiggles like she’s being tickled.

“Besides, children are so cute that you forget your hatred. Once you hug one, you get sucked in. When they get hungry and cry, I want to give them my milk, even though I’m a grandmother.”

Ms. Kimiko laughs. Babies definitely make you feel better. When I see their innocent smiles, or sleeping faces, it makes me want to hug them. Maybe it’s my paternal instincts that makes me want to protect them. Sakurako-san feels the same way. She sticks her fingers under the edge of the baby’s hat, and strokes her soft hair. Ms. Kimiko smiles.

“If that’s how you feel, why did you kill Mr. Toudou?”

“...Huh?”

The previously pleasant scene and my face both freeze.

“...What do you mean?”

Ms. Kimiko is thinking the same thing. Her face stiffens, and she stares at Sakurako-san.

“That was a bad way to say it. How did you overlook something fatal?”

“Sakurako-san, what are you talking about?!”

“You said you were thoroughly managing Mr. Toudou’s health. If you don’t check the side effects of the medicine, you never know what will happen.” Sakurako-san scratches her temple with her index finger, and snorts. “Mr. Toudou was taking a medicine made of digitalis. You confirmed what was in that medicine. The problem with it is that he was also taking calcium supplements.”

“Is… Is the calcium important? My husband was 90 years old. Even just a bone fracture is hard on someone at that age.”

“You’re right. Calcium is definitely an important nutrient. Still, I’m afraid that it’s not compatible with digitalis medicine. When there’s a high concentration of calcium in the heart, it tends to worsen the effects of arrhythmia that the digitalis causes. With a small dose, the symptoms won’t be too bad immediately. However, with continued use, it can cause problems.”

“That’s…” I groan.

“Ms. Kimiko. You knew what would happen.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“Weren’t you careful, even at the hospital? Or did you give him a dose that wasn’t confirmed by the doctor? You said you were concerned about his diet, but then you said not to worry about it?”

“I gave him supplements for his health. I didn’t force him to take them. Anyway, it’s not like someone who cuts people off in conversations will listen to me. Even if I did know, I would have said something.” Ms. Kimiko’s voice was gentle, like Shouko-san’s, but it suddenly turns sharp.

“So why are you saying this now? Why didn’t you say it back then?”

“I just want to know. I want to blame you for crimes, not reveal it to other people. I’m not interested in crimes, or evil.”

“Then why-”

“Because it’s something that can’t be seen. That’s why I want to know. I want to know the truth, the bones of the crime. I’m dying to know.”

Sakurako-san desperately tries to appeal to Ms. Kimiko with a passion that she doesn’t normally show to others. Ms. Kimiko looks at Sakurako-san with surprise, then sighs and quickly gives up.

“...Then let me tell you one thing. It’s not my own story, it’s someone else’s.”

There was a woman. She was married to a man she hated, but this was an era where love didn’t matter. The woman had no choice but to endure it. This man was very energetic, and forced the woman into submission every night. The woman hated it.

However, when she held her child to her chest, the world changed. She thought it was a wonderful gift. Those tender, warm, helpless hands of her child filled her with warm tears of joy. It was the first time she felt like she was alive. Even though she hated the man, the woman endured it. If she endured it, she could raise her cute baby.

Before long, the man became dissatisfied with just the woman, and started to seek out the woman’s younger sister, and other women. Of course, she didn’t like it at first. In addition to the man, the woman lost her precious little sister. But then she realized she was saved at the same time. After all, the man she hates is with someone other than her. When the man didn’t return in the evening, she couldn’t help but be happy. In addition, the man gave the woman children one after another.

It became harder for the woman to have children. She had many stillbirths, and there were even births that threatened her life. She didn’t know what other women were like, but the woman was delighted as long as she could keep having children. The man continued to give the woman children into old age. The woman was really happy when she children grew up and had grandchildren.

The man and woman hated each other, but they stayed together. The broken pieces came together, and they aimed for the same future.

But one day, the man fell ill, and everything changed. When the man fell ill, it was the first time they noticed their old age. The man suddenly became weak, and it became hard to support more children. That’s why the man started giving the children away, and he began killing them before they were born. The woman knew, and mourned from the bottom of her heart. She asked the man why he didn’t want to hold his children in his arms, or feel the happiness of being a father.

So, the man told the woman, “I like women who are scared of being pregnant, and forcing them into it.”

Although the man said he doesn't want children, he still never stopped making them. The woman was truly sad. As the lives of the babies were snatched away, every day became a living hell. At night, her heart was filled with anxiety. She thought that if something changed, it would stop. But the man wasn't the kind of person to listen to his wife. She started to give him dangerous medicine, and pretended not to notice.

To start, she didn't ask other people's advice. Shouldn't she keep silent about committing a crime? She didn't wait around worrying. She decided to devote herself to the man more than ever, to keep him from worrying. Besides, isn't it natural for an aging man to take calcium? She thought there was no other way. But there was a miscalculation, and the man didn't die quickly. Even so, the man's heart finally stopped on his birthday. Even if she had to mislead her children… it finally came to an end. She protected their small lives.

"It's good to see you, madam."

Someone suddenly calls out to us, and I return to my senses. I turn around, and see Nanako-san standing here. Her atmosphere seems much calmer, and more self confident than before. Maybe it's it because she's a mother now.

"Yes, you too." Ms. Kimiko replies.

In Nanako-san's hands is a bright red paper bag from a confection shop.

"I forgot my souvenir on the train. Sometimes it's nice to take a leisurely train ride, and go somewhere unfamiliar."

Ms. Kimiko gives a dignified laugh.

"These days, I'm on good terms with Shouko. I feel like I'm talking to my sister when we were in school. Well, I'm not a school girl anymore, though." Ms. Kimiko says happily. Nanako-san says "well then" and bows quickly, then pushes the stroller toward the taxi stand quickly, chasing after Ms. Kimiko.

The two people and the baby suddenly board the taxi, and leave. When Ms. Kimiko's figure disappears, the contrast between her pale blue-green clothes and the bright red paper bag burns into my eyes in the dizzying sunlight.

"Is what she said just now true…?" I say, but Sakurako-san is already heading towards the intersection with a satisfied look.

"Please wait! Sakurako-san!" I chase after her in confusion. She glances at me, but doesn't answer my question. "Because… If that's true, isn't it a crime?"

"It's not good, but from losing one life, another small life was saved. It balances out."

"That's…"

The crossing light turns green, and Sakurako-san starts waking. I don't start walking right away.

"...Boy. Do you like pomegranate?"

"Pomegranate? Like the fruit?"

"That's right. The fruit that's packed with blood red fruit, those pomegranates." Sakurako-san suddenly looks back at me, as if to say "aren't you coming?"

"Even if you haven't eaten one, don't they look beautiful?"

I stop walking to answer. Of course I know pomegranates. However, since they're not common in Hokkaido, I'm not very familiar with them. I've seen imported pomegranates at super markets for cheap, but I've never thought about eating them. I look to Sakurako-san. She eventually stops and takes a short breath.

"Every time I see Ms. Kimiko, I think of that. All those tiny seeds in her chest, packed like in that grotesque fruit."

"Ms. Kimiko? Umm… I don't think I really understand…"

"Do you know about Hariti? One of the Buddhist yaksha?"

"Huh? Oh, no."

I'm puzzled by Sakurako-san's train of thought, which seems to be flying all over the place. She looks at me like she's losing her patience a bit. I don't understand why.

"She was a woman who bore a lot of her own children, but also killed other people's' children. Buddha didn't see it, and hid her children. So, for the first time, she knew the pain of losing a child. Since then, she changed and became a goddess of easy delivery, and protecting children. She chose to eat pomegranates instead.."

"Pomegranates…"

"Pomegranates are a symbol of fertility. In some countries, pomegranates even represent women's chests and reproductive organs. It's the image of women who raise children, and give birth. Pomegranates are ugly, but densely packed full of blood coloured life."

With that said, Sakurako-san holds out a pomegranate, and shows it to me. It's like she's showing me her heart. It looks like that red paper bag. Red, the colour of blood.

We cross paths with an unfamiliar mother, holding hands with her child. She happily returns her child's smile while they walk. She walks beside her child, who is walking clumsily. She smiles, but she still looks troubled. She notices the crossing signal start flashing, and hurries to grab her child. I stop walking.

"Being a parent can sometimes be frightening or surprising. Still, if it's for their children, women can be yaksha."

Epilogue

Today was also hot. Not that I mind the heat. With one day left in July, Asahikawa's highest temperature exceeds 30 degrees every day. The whole city is wrapped in heat. Of course, Sakurako-san's house is no exception. Normally, if you aren't too hot, gran won't bring out any iced tea. Today, since it's so hot, she soon brought me some without saying anything.

"Wow, it's so warm today! No, it's more like it's really is hot." I say to officer Utsumi, who is sitting next to me in casual clothes, while he fans himself..

His frizzy hair looks like a bird's nest, and shakes in the lukewarm breeze.

"Please don't let it be hot like this all the time. Isn't this too hot?"

Utsumi-san has a short sleeves shirt over his shoulder, and cargo shorts on. Even though he's dressed lightly, there's sweat dripping off his chin. I unintentionally glare at him, but Utsumi-san just shrugs and looks toward the garden. In the garden, 3 small children are laughing and running around.

"Isn't it hot? I was going to go to the Asahiyama zoo, but I'm afraid of the kids getting heatstroke, so this saved me."

Utsumi-san squints while grinding up the ice in his iced tea.

"Well, are you looking after them?"

"My sister needed a cecum operation. On her operation day, I suddenly had my niece and nephew pushed on me without being about to protest. I thought I could show them the penguins since it's hot, right? Well, you seem good with children, Shou-chan, so I'm glad we exchanged emails."

"I don't particularly like kids." I answer sullenly, but Utsumi-san doesn't hear me and says "That's good, I'm glad," while laughing.

That's why when I get the email from Utsumi-san about the children, I bring him over to Sakurako-san's house. Besides Sakurako-san, gran seems like she'd be good with children.

"Besides, a bit of energy is good." Utsumi-san mutters, while he puts on his white hat.

The children are jumping around in the water from Sakurako-san's hose. Utsumi-san's older sister has a pair of 4 year old twins, who are playing with Ii-chan, Yuuka Tominaga.

"... That's right."

It seems it's hard for Utsumi-san to play with the twins on his own, so he invited Ii-chan to play with them. Perhaps he wants a chance to make sure Ii-chan is doing well. Of course, I do as well.

"You're so sly, Ustumi-san. If you say Ii-chan is with you, Sakurako-san and I can't refuse."

When asked to go play with children, Sakurako-san immediately says, "there's no way". But if she's with Ii-chan, she's reluctant, but accepts it. Maybe Sakurako-san likes Ii-chan because she saved her before.

Ii-chan seems to have been taken in by her mother's distant relative in the city, who is married with no kids. She seems to be taken care of very well, you can tell how cheerful she is just by looking at her. Her face is also much more full and round than it was during her short time with us.

"Now, it's time for lunch. Please call the ladies."

As usual, gran comes up behind me without a sound, then hits Ustumi-san on the back with a duster, and points to the garden.

"Understood!" I say as I hurry to the veranda that Ustumi-san left the door to open. "Ah…"

The shirt on his shoulder gets caught on the picture frame on the above the mantle. The picture frame slips off and starts to fall, but I manage to catch it before it hits the ground.

"Oh! Nice reflexes!" Utsumi-san says casually with a thumbs up, then he disappears into the garden.

I'm still holding the picture frame. I know I shouldn't look at it, but I try to take a quick glance while I put it back above the fireplace, but I end up staring.

"..."

It's a family photo, but it's a bit pale from being sun bleached. A girl wearing a white blouse and a black dress, a man standing behind her wearing all black. There's a woman wearing a kimono beside them, who is holding a baby. Maybe… That girl is Sakurako-san. I only look for a moment, so I can't confirm it, but I think this is a commemorative photograph of a very normal, four person family.

"It didn't fall out. It's fine… It didn't break."

Gran stares at me, with a bit of worry on her face. Did she notice that I saw the photo? I spoke in a panicked way, but gran sighs with relief. She still picks up the photo to make sure it's safe.

"...She was a delicate person."

"Huh?"

"The wife."

"Ah…"

Gran suddenly says. For a moment, I don't quite understand, but I remember that gran used to serve Sakurako-san's mother. Gran looks at the photo with a gentle expression, but she looks lonely while she talks to herself.

"The lady has a strong body, just like the master, and her face is his spitting image… and her poor sense of humour. They're like two peas in a pod**."** Gran smiles.

"Are their personalities similar, too?"

"I'm not sure. I guess they're similar in some places, as parent and child."

Gran holds the picture to her chest, while staring out at the garden. It seems Sakurako-san is spraying Ustumi-san with the hose. Utsumi-san's shouts and the children's laughter echo.

"That's right… I wonder if she cries, but never shows anyone."

Gran watches the commotion in the garden for a little while, then squints and mutters something.

"The lady seems fine, but despite her appearance, she's lonely."

"She's lonely… that's a bit surprising."

Rather, doesn't she seem to like being alone…? My reply sounds surprised. Gran smiles sweetly. She puts her index finger to her lips - it's a secret.

"Well, shall we prepare now?"

Gran sees Utsumi-san playing in the water outside. She laughs and says "oh my", then puts the picture back and returns to the kitchen.

"Will you help?"

There were lot of people eating lunch today. Even just arranging plates is a big problem. I chase after gran in response. She smiles widely.

"Is that so. Well then, young master, please bring the plates."

The Kujo residence, wrapped up in commotion, feels hotter, more cramped, and brighter than usual.

"If you're not fast enough, the soumen will get soggy! Please wipe yourself off quickly!" I shout off the balcony, towards the garden.

The water droplets create shiny rainbows. Sakurako-san smiles, with the cuffs of her white dress soaked. It’s a beautiful smile. Ah - I love summer!